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Title of thesis TOWARDS UNIVERSALISM : RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND SREČKO KOSOVEL; A JOINT PERSPECTIVE IN A DISJOINTED WORLD Degree PH.D

This thesis is the first in-depth exploration of the connection between the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) and the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel (1904-1926). It proceeds from a key observation that, in spite of their differences, they share a worldview that derives from a structurally similar positioning within their respective historical situations. Both wrote from the awareness of their region's subjugated status and endorsed an anti-imperialist stance that rejected nationalism as a viable means of liberation, embracing instead a creative universalist ideal. While seeking to establish the reasons, relevance, and manner in which Tagore inspired Kosovel, the thesis also traces broader parallels and shared concerns between the two poets, situating their "universalisms" in their respective culturo-historical contexts.

The introduction and chapter one lay out the comparative and theoretical framework, exploring "universalism" in its embattled relationship with "nationalism" in the context of anti-imperialist/colonial struggles to arrive at a workable definition with which to approach the two poets. Part II looks at the personal and historical factors shaping Tagore's theory and practice of liberation, as he came to reject nationalism and deconstruct the binary logic of colonial modernity so as to reposition India and the individual in a global framework. The importance of his post-Nobel Prize travels for his world vision is explored in conjunction with Tagore's reputation in the West, particularly in Europe's Central and Eastern peripheries, such as Slovenia. Part III introduces Kosovel and establishes the framework conjoining the two poets across the vastly different culturo-geographic space. Kosovel's reading of Tagore is framed through the paradigms of (cross-colonial) situational identifications and global modernity. It proposes a new reading of Kosovel's poetry, analyzing Kosovel's shift from a romantic to modernist sensibility in the light of his endorsement of Tagore's universalist idea(l)s.

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TOWARDS UNIVERSALISM:

RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND SREČKO KOSOVEL;

A JOINT PERSPECTIVE IN A DISJOINTED WORLD

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School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2009

ABSTRACT

This thesis is the first in-depth exploration of the connection between the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) and the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel (1904-1926). It proceeds from a key observation that, in spite of their differences, they share a worldview that derives from a structurally similar positioning within their respective historical situations. Both wrote from the awareness of their region's subjugated status and endorsed an anti-imperialist stance that rejected nationalism as a viable means of liberation, embracing instead a creative universalist ideal. While seeking to establish the reasons, relevance, and manner in which Tagore inspired Kosovel, the thesis also traces broader parallels and shared concerns between the two poets, situating their "universalisms" in their respective culturo-historical contexts.

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Note on Translation

Where published translations in English were available, I have used and accredited these accordingly. All remaining translations from the Slovene language are by the author.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first and foremost word of acknowledgement goes to my supervisor, the Tagore scholar and translator, as well as an internationally established poet himself, William Radice. If it was not for meeting him at a Tagore event in London already as an MA student with the Open University, I would never have embarked on this project. His tremendous enthusiasm, ungrudging help and intellectual support throughout these years, even prior to joining the doctoral programme at SOAS, has been a true source of inspiration, enabling me also to enter the world of Tagore scholarship and forge lasting links with numerous scholars in the field.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support received from the AHRC fee-only Doctoral award for the second and third years of my research, as well as a fieldwork grant, and the supplementary maintenance grant received from the Slovenian Ministry of Culture. Without further financial assistance from both my parents, whose all-round support surpasses any words of acknowledgement, I would have had to struggle incomparably more with the practical realities of life.

In the several trips to Calcutta and Santiniketan over the course of my research, I have had the benefit of discussing my work with Ananda and Swati Lal, Supriya Chaudhuri, Rosinka and Amit Chaudhuri, and have had the privilege of having drafts of my Tagore chapters read by Uma Das Gupta, Kalyan Bagchi, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Parimal Ghosh, Projit Mukharji, Joseph and Kathleen O'Connell of Toronto University, as well as Amina Yaquin from SOAS, whose insights and critical comments have been invaluable. My research undertaken at the Rabindra-Bhavana Library in Santiniketan was greatly facilitated by the assistance of Swati Ghose, and I would also like to thank Hana Basu for her help as a translator of some of the Bengali sources. The friendship of a number of individuals, especially of my Bagan Para neighbour Arpita Saha (Choton) and of Keya and Satish from Purva Pali, have allowed me to gain a more intimate understanding of the local environment, and their help has got me through the more trying times in Santiniketan. Monjita Mukharji and Jayani Bonnerjee have made me feel at home in Calcutta and their friendship and the sharing of our joint PhD lives here in London as well as the many discussions on our respective topics have enriched my understanding and experience of Bengali culture.

As for the Kosovel part of my thesis, I must foremost thank the informal mentorship of Iztok Osojnik, who has tirelessly discussed the various facets of my work throughout the years and monitored the progress of my argument. I am also deeply grateful for the editorial and critical comments of David Brooks, Sinan Gudzević and Peter Svetina, all of whom took the time to read the Kosovel section of the thesis. I would also like to acknowledge Lenart Škof and Liza Debevec for their stimulating intellectual exchange owing to their different and yet relevant research interests in non-European cultures. My Kosovel co-translator Barbara Siegel Carlson has been an invaluable collaborator and friend throughout and has shown great interest in my work, offering insightful comments. Conversations with Dragica Sosič and Pavle Skrinjar, people who have had close acquaintance with members of Kosovel family and have privileged insight into the poet's immediate background, have been highlights of my fieldwork time spent in Slovenia, and I thank them for the time they have ungrudgingly offered in talking to me and for enabling me to access Kosovel's personal library. I would also like to thank the staff at the Ljubljana's Slavonic

Library (Slovanska knjižnica), and National and University Library of Slovenia (Narodna Univerzitetna knjižnica) in Ljubljana, as well as the National Library of Serbia (Narodna Biblioteka Srbije) for their assistance.

And last but not least I want to thank my friends and PhD colleagues: Carool Kersten, who read the various drafts of my thesis chapters and was always encouraging in his comments, Polly Palister-Wilkins for her incisive reading of my Universalism chapter, and Mara Malagodi and Valentina Burrai, with whom I have formed a close "lunch" community over the past few months that has made the final stage of the writing-up considerably more bearable.

Ana Jelnikar
London
July, 2009

PART I

> "Look, Jyoti, nothing is plain and simple where human beings are concerned. The dictionary fixes a meaning, but as it interacts with a human variable, the meaning splits in seven different ways, like the Ganga branching off as it nears the sea."
>
> Tagore, 1928, *Sesher Kobita; The Last Poem*

Nothing gets destroyed in the cosmos. Least of all ideas. If life gave them birth, they were born for life, not death.

Kosovel, 1925, in a letter to Fanica Obidova

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, within a few months of each other, two newly selected and translated books of poetry came out in England bearing the same title: *The Golden Boat*. One contained a selection from the extensive oeuvre of the world-renowned Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and the other the selected poems of the relatively unknown Slovenian poet Srečko Kosovel (1904-1926), whose status as a national literary figure is however similarly iconic to Tagore's.[1] That the publication histories of these two poets, whose writings extend back in time by at least eighty years, with Tagore having a long and complicated English career to his name and Kosovel practically none, should have converged in such a way is of course a mere coincidence; beyond the mere fact that poetry in English translation has become richer by a contribution from the world of Bengali and Slovenian letters respectively there would in fact be nothing obvious to link the two books, nor the two poets, were it not for the same title. Yet, it is this connection that has, at the most basic level, driven the research of this thesis.

Soon it became clear that what linked Tagore and Kosovel into a joint framework across the continents was not just the fact that Kosovel read and took inspiration from the Bengali poet, but that they shared a remarkable set of preoccupations. I contend that these commonalities, the overarching expression of which is a creative ideal of universality, have a backdrop in similar, if by no means identical, forces of politico-cultural domination. The aim of the thesis is thus twofold: while seeking to establish the reasons, relevance, and the manner in which Tagore inspired Kosovel, it is also a study of how both writers, from their respective "margins", responded to the historical predicament of Western imperialism by reaching out to some kind of a "universal" ideal. Therefore, rather than relegating Tagore to an "influence", the thesis accords equal weight to both writers. The aim of the introduction is to raise questions that guided my research, as I tried to make sense of what connects these two contemporaries from India and Europe in the pre- and post-World War I era. I follow the steps in which the research topic itself evolved, while setting out the framework for the comparison.

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[1] See Tagore 2008 and Kosovel 2008 respectively.

Kosovel reads Tagore

When in 1925, Srečko Kosovel, then aged twenty-one and within months of his untimely death, was getting his first manuscript ready for publication, he decided to give it the title *Zlati čoln* ("*The Golden Boat*"). He wrote to his friend and associate Ciril Debevec, "I am going to call it *Zlati čoln*, why, I'll tell you [when I next see you]" (10/09/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 246)[2]. If Debevec ever did get to hear of Kosovel's reasons, this revelation has been lost to history, and the snippets of information that survived in Kosovel's notes and letters, do not tell us, in so many words, that he was alluding to Tagore's collection of poems of that title, or its eponymous poem "Sonar tari". Would he have read either the poem or the collection? Not likely, as neither had by then appeared in English (and subsequently in other European languages), but it is most likely that he knew of Tagore's writing *Sonar tari*, since the collection was mentioned in the press coverage, after the Indian poet was awarded the Nobel Prize. In any case, Kosovel was an enthusiastic reader of Tagore (in Slovene, Croatian and German translations), and the Bengali poet occupied an important place among the writers and thinkers he admired.[3] Presumably then, the choice of the same title was not a mere coincidence, but a direct allusion to the Indian poet, an act of homage, as it were, of one poet to another.

One of the tasks at hand therefore is to trace the ideas and lessons Kosovel imbibed from Tagore and see how he related them to his particular context. Are there suggestions in Kosovel's writings that can be attributed directly to Tagore? Why did Kosovel feel drawn to the Indian poet in the first place? How did he incorporate and assimilate what he read into his own poetic and intellectual horizon? In what way did this serve his preoccupations and interests? And, finally, are there correspondences, or deeper unities to be drawn between the two contemporaries?

Although Kosovel scholars have invariably noted Tagore alongside various other important writers and thinkers that were influential for Kosovel, beyond a mere mention of this fact, or at most a few paragraphs or pages devoted to the problematic, the topic has not been researched in its own right.[4] This thesis is the first attempt to examine and locate Tagore's relevance for the Slovene poet, and makes for a new

[2] Unless stated otherwise, all translations of Kosovel's letters, notes and journals are mine.
[3] Tagore is by far the most often referred to foreign poet and author in Kosovel's essayistic writings and notes, even in his poetry. He gets a mention over fifty times. Leo Tolstoy, another figure Kosovel admired, is referred to thirty times and Romain Rolland fifteen.
[4] Ocvirk 1977: 1008-11; 1020-22; Šrimf 1981/2; Zadravec 1986: 349-52; 360-2; Tokarz 2004a: 173.

contribution to Kosovel scholarship. Likewise it will add to Tagore scholarship by showcasing one particular response to the Indian poet from Europe's (colonized) margins (historization and qualification notwithstanding, Kosovel wrote from a place implicated in "colonial" history) at the height of his international fame in the nineteen-twenties. Albeit a small piece in the mosaic of Tagore's international reputation, its significance can be said to extend beyond its arcane historical value.

Within the existing body of critically examined Western responses to Tagore in which Orientalism aligned to imperial interests has been in the forefront of discussions, responses which do not fit into this mould are an important reminder of an arguably richer spectrum of Western reactions than the Said-inspired model, or perhaps any theoretical model, can allow for. What of the fellow poets and like-minded individuals in the West who endorsed Tagore's literary genius outside the strictures of an imposed or adopted mystic identity? Or, argued differently, in as much as Kosovel's response to Tagore, in itself emblematic of a host of other similar European responses, known and unknown to us, is still seen to operate within the twentieth century Orientalist discourse of "Otherness", then it must be acknowledged, as J. J. Clarke has argued in his reassessment of Orientalism, that there can be, as indeed there was, a counter-hegemonic cultural dimension to this phenomenon. In this Eastern thought served as a "corrective mirror" to Europe, undermining its imperialist ideologies and orthodoxies. The talk of "crisis" or "sickness" besetting Western civilization and of the need to turn "Eastwards" for cure, which characterized the more subversive strain of twentieth-century orientalist discourse (1997: 26-30), provides one relevant framework within which Kosovel's response can be made sense of.

In contrast to Tagore's more famous cross-cultural literary encounters, as for example, with the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, or the Anglo-American Ezra Pound, or the French writer André Gide – the case of Kosovel follows a one-way trajectory. Sadly, Kosovel died just months before Tagore travelled to former Yugoslavia on one of his European tours, stopping at Zagreb (Croatia) and Belgrade (Serbia) in November 1926, but not at Ljubljana (Slovenia), where Kosovel lived and worked for the most part of his short life. Tagore, we can safely assume, would not have heard of the Slovenian poet, who was then only just beginning to emerge as a recognizable literary voice. Certainly, Kosovel wielded neither the influence nor the power of established poets à la Yeats, whose laudatory introduction to Tagore's English *Gitanjali* (1912) had largely set the tone to the chorus of Western adoration for the

Indian poet. The value of looking at his response therefore lies precisely in that he is a representative of what Leela Gandhi has dubbed as "western 'non-player[s]' in the drama of imperialism" whose "minor" discourses are nevertheless a variation on the larger theme of anti-imperialism shared internationally by a small intellectual elite in the first decades of the twentieth century (2006: 1).

Furthermore, in the absence of direct historical links also between the two poets' respective countries, we are led to adjust the comparative angle to consider correspondences and relations which are *not* primarily guided by direct impact or exchange, but are the outcome rather of negotiating a common (virtual) space of global modernity. Partha Mitter's concept of "virtual cosmopolis" to denote a shared world-wide corpus of modern ideas, as well as ideas on modernity, with which the metropolitan elites from both "centre" and "periphery" of the (pre-)industrialized world were grappling, sometimes through channels of direct personal contact, but largely through the printed medium (2007: 11-12) – provides another relevant framework for linking the two writers across vastly different cultural and geopolitical spaces.

Tagore *and* Kosovel

Tagore and Kosovel both had a strong sense of participating in a historical era, shaped by what is now commonly referred to as the "first wave of globalization". Between 1870 and the First World War, in some ways "foreshadowing our own time", as Adam K. Webb succinctly put it, "international commerce flourished and bound far-flung corners of the world together. Industrial development and modern habits of mind made their first inroads into traditional societies. By the time Europe's own imperial confidence collapsed into war and revolution, the old civilizations of Asia had already undergone a half century or so of transformation" (2008: 189).

Imperialism, migration, and technological development had all contributed towards an expanded international context, whereby individuals and cultures could no longer live in complete ignorance of each other. Both poets saw themselves as writing at the threshold of a new era, stressing the need to understand local problems in a global perspective, and seek solutions in world-wide cooperation. Painfully aware of the historical realities of their time, where a handful of Western powers had brought an overwhelming part of the globe under imperial control, they deplored the fact that the meeting of cultures had come for the most part on the back of conquest

and colonization, rather than in the spirit of free exchange, but argued, against the odds, for a non-hierarchical dialogue between cultures. How to resist foreign impositions and yet not bar oneself from the discoveries of the modern age, whether in science, technology, economics, politics, art, or literature; how to adjust creatively and retain agency as opposed to imitate slavishly or conform unthinkingly, and what are the implications of global expansion for cultural identities -- were questions that preoccupied both thinkers. So rather than seeing Kosovel's reading of Tagore merely in terms of direct influence, it is possible to understand some of their shared concerns as a result of being exposed to the same globalizing forces such as capitalism and imperialism and of intuiting common goals arising out of the consciousness of inhabiting one world as opposed to separate cultural enclaves.

It must, however, be noted here that the onslaught of modernity on tradition was arguably more distressing in Asia than in Europe, since the new impulses got identified with an alien civilization. Kosovel's "in-between" status within Europe, though perhaps muting the question of Westernization, does not however make it irrelevant. A differentiated view of Europe is essential to our analysis. The comparison certainly brings to the fore common questions of civilizational identity, particularly against the new climate of self-questioning in the West after the war. The high noon of imperialism had passed and challenges to colonialism could no longer be ignored. Imperialist wars had collapsed the world, as Tagore put it, into "the biggest orgy of evil", and Europe, as Kosovel kept reiterating, was "in crisis". Many intellectuals and avant-garde artists of the nineteen-twenties, including Kosovel, raised a vocal protest against aspects of European civilization and some of its certainties. And it would seem that their protest is not unrelated to the emergence of new colonial writers and their presence in avant-garde circles in the West, whose own concerns posed a challenge to European cultural authority and contributed to the "volatile new cosmopolitan climate" (Boehmer 1995: 123). Cultural and aesthetic influences appear to have moved in two directions as nineteenth-century forms were being superseded by more revolutionary modernist aesthetics. That Kosovel's avant-garde poetics, as I will show, is visibly indebted to his reading of Tagore, himself a forerunner of postcolonial modernism, is a case in point.

Linn Cary Mehta has aptly suggested with reference to a number of poets of decolonization from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Carribean including Tagore, that poetry of the early twentieth century "stands at the fulcrum of the world literary tradition", meaning that from that point onwards "the world can no longer be divided

into two literary hemispheres, into the European and non-European [...] or into first-world and third-world literature" (2004: 2). Furthermore, she sees the aesthetic changes of the period as signalling "a new 'world order' in literature" as much as in politics or economics (*Ibid.:* 15).

The sort of cross-fertilization and internationalism that she notes as characterizing the poetry of decolonization (and predates their respective countries' political independence) would also seem to be self-consciously motivated by the idea that it was from within one's own tradition that one worked towards a "universal" tradition, opening one's language, whether a vernacular or an adopted and adapted colonial tongue, for the experience of "the other". The result was a forging of a distinctly modern(ist) consciousness in which the vernacular is reconciled with the foreign, tradition with modernity. Kosovel's aspirations for an ideal "universal artist", as he noted in his journal, someone who in the manner of his descriptions would not be "patriotically local" but "*humanly universal*" (emphasis author's, CW 3: 750) can be productively related to his search for a form that would capture the larger concerns of his age. To align him with other poets of resistance and decolonization is one way in which his poetry can be opened up to fresh interpretations, an approach that is largely validated through his reading of Tagore but also through his frequent expressions of solidarity with the colonized the world over.

This brings us to an important notion that I interpret as underlying Kosovel's particular response to Tagore – that of *situational identification*, which I borrow from Patrick Colm Hogan, where sympathies are forged between individuals and inspirations derived from a sense of shared predicaments, or as Hogan puts it, "we develop an immediate sense of intimacy with someone as we intuit shared feelings, ideas, references, [and] expectations" (2004: 26). The colonial framework provided one such context for trans-national solidarities. Elleke Boehmer has spoken pertinently of *cross-colony* identifications (in the context of anti-colonial nationalist movements) whereby ideas are transferred and adapted laterally across geographical space at the same historical time from structurally similar, if specific, material conditions. The "contact zone" of cultural exchange conventionally located between the colonial centre and its periphery is thus relocated *between* peripheries themselves (2002: 2), giving rise to a more complex picture of ideas travelling multilaterally, from various "centres", as opposed to unilaterally spreading out from the (Western) centre to the (Non-western) margins, as the conventional influence model often presupposes.

And once the flow of ideas is recognized as polycentric and also inherently dialogic, spatial constructs such as "East" and "West", "Europe" and "India", also become increasingly problematic. "Modern civilization", as Debraj Bhattacharya recently argued, is a global phenomenon enabled by a communication revolution and "characterized by the emergence of a network of metropolises as a product of the worldwide spread of capitalism". Its history, he argues, must be understood through a connected history of world metropolises, as much of Calcutta, Bombay, Cairo and Shanghai as those of London, Paris, and New York. For "a metropolis like Calcutta [even though it stood outside the industrialized world] was more in tune with ideas associated with modernity than the countryside or small towns of Europe or America" or, for that matter "the rest of colonial India" (2008a: 243; 263). Distinctions between "East" and "West" are indeed redundant in this context, superseded arguably by more problematic and trenchant divisions between those who have access to modern forms of knowledge and those who do not, but this is another issue that will be addressed once we consider Tagore's and Kosovel's efforts as educators.

To sum up: two notions have emerged that can helpfully frame my comparative analysis. The first is the *cross-colony situational identification* and the second that of *shared* or *global modernity*. The first is useful in that it rotates the focus from the conventional center-periphery paradigm to a periphery-periphery oriented one, but the second concept dispenses the core-periphery paradigm altogether and opens up, perhaps more radically, a methodological perspective that deals with specific regions or cultures as continuously enmeshed in processes of multilateral transfer, exchange, and interaction that complicate identity discourses along national or regional lines. How Tagore and Kosovel each negotiated global modernity from their respective regions, taking over some of its impulses and certainties, while questioning others, including its metropolis-centric bias, will be examined in the course of the thesis.

Approaching universalism

The thesis, as noted already, proceeds from a key observation that Tagore and Kosovel, their differences notwithstanding, shared many concerns on the back of their similar positioning within their respective settings. For it can be established that the broad structural presence of European imperialism, as argued by Mehta and

others, provides a framework that makes it possible to identify individual voices across space and time that carry a strikingly similar message. Often it may not even be a question of direct influence or borrowing, or, for that matter, situational identification, but a question of a parallel voicing of ideas against the backdrop of a similar colonial dialectics. It is against this dialectics, which pits the colonizer against the colonized, burdening the relationship with various binarisms of racial imagination, that both Tagore and Kosovel came to propound a universalist stance. Their "larger search for liberation" (Said 1994: 265) brought them into an uneasy relationship with nationalism as a dominant ideological and political force of their time, and helped them reconceptualize cultural identities to resist foreign subjugation in an alternative way.

There are certain paradoxes that present themselves here: Tagore, for example, was an important figure in Indian nationalist struggle, for a time in the lead of the Swadeshi ("our country") movement in Bengal, but was he a nationalist? And Kosovel's attitude towards his native region's Italian occupiers was surprisingly benign, as was Tagore's in relation to the British. And yet they both wrote from a strong awareness of their peoples' subjugated status and were spokesmen for their disenfranchised countries. What were their attitudes to the question of nation, nationality and nationalism in relation to anti-imperialism? What, in turn, was the "universal" they reached for by way of transcending categories of nation and ideologies of nationalism they found so problematic? Was this a category that supposedly already existed, or was it a category in the making – an open-ended concept? And if open rather than determined, descriptive rather than prescriptive, then how was it to be created?

Both nationalism and universalism are notions as well as sets of practices that do not lend themselves to any one single interpretation or approach, and will continue to generate heated discussions across humanities and social sciences. A complete overview of their intellectual histories is beyond the scope of this thesis. My interest is primarily in "universalism" as a departure from "nationalism" in the precise context of anti-imperialist struggles. This is the embattled triangle of –isms that I will be exploring in relation to Tagore and Kosovel, as I historicize their particular stances, with some attention also given to the overlapping concept of "cosmopolitanism". In order to derive an enabling notion of universalism (our main focus), so that we can approach or position Tagore's and Kosovel's intellectual orientations in a meaningful way, it is important to have some understanding of the

arguments that have "split" theorists into anti- and pro- universalist camps. In the final instance, we are interested in the potential of Tagore's and Kosovel's universalist thought for illuminating current issues of human survival on a global scale.

Starting from the negative evaluations of universalism (understood in the singular) from within the field of postcolonial studies, where universalism was initially seen as an imperialist totalizing discourse that carries a distinct Eurocentric or ethnocentric stigma, we can proceed to ask: is universalism perforce a hegemonic and totalizing ideology rooted in fictitious universality of certain races, classes, nations or some such other category? If articulated in opposition to Western imperialism and its totalizing discourses, is it still hegemonic? Had we not better assume the existence of multiple universalisms, and if so, are there modalities that are perhaps defensible? Or even, is it possible, as Edward Said argued in relation to humanism, to be critical of universalism in the name of universalism and fashion a different kind of universalism that is not ethnocentric but truly cosmopolitan (Said 2004: 10-1)?

Certainly, Tagore's and Kosovel's examples will allow us to break with monolithic conceptualisation of Universalism as an exclusive site of imperialist control. In this respect it is important to acknowledge from the outset what the historian Sugata Bose was led to conclude with respect to the social, political and cultural history of the Indian Ocean during the age of European imperialism and anticolonial nationalism. His conclusion carries a sense of more general applicability:

> A discerning historical investigation makes clear [...] that universalism was hardly a quest over which European modernity had any kind of monopoly. Local, regional, and national cultures in different parts of the globe were not just jealous guardians of their own distinctiveness, but also wished to participate in and contribute to larger arenas of cultural exchange. In this process the lines that separated the large constructs of East and West, Asia and Europe, as well as the smaller communitarian categories came to be transcended in myriad ways (2006: 270).

The sense of intellectual entitlement unrestricted by geo-political boundaries as well as the need to belong to a larger universe does indeed link these two poets and their imaginative responses to their historical predicament in a similar way.

Chapter overview

This thesis thus revolves around three main components: Tagore, Kosovel and universalism. "Universalism" provides the overarching link between the two writers. Due to the amorphous and contentious nature of the concept, it is important to delimit it in a way that can be useful for the purpose of our study. This is done at the starts of the thesis. The main body of the thesis then falls into two parts, divided equally (in number of words if not in chapters) between Tagore and Kosovel. Since Tagore is the poet and thinker Kosovel read and took inspiration from, the first half of the thesis is devoted to him. Understanding some of Tagore's main preoccupations and ideas, particularly those that Kosovel himself imbibed, will enable us to reflect more sharply on Kosovel's own thinking, as we see it against his particular context. Therefore the chapters will proceed as follows:

Chapter One aims for a workable notion of universalism in dialogue with some of the more recent debates surrounding the concept (with some attention to cosmopolitanism) primarily in postcolonial and cultural theory, while also drawing on relevant political and social thought. It serves as a "literature review" of relevant theoretical work – a review that cannot be undertaken for the Tagore/Kosovel pairing itself, as no one has previously studied it.

Chapter Two provides the personal and historical background against which Tagore shaped his theory and practice of liberation. The poet's long life spanning two centuries, and the evolution of his ideas must be seen in a longer time-framework – against the tumultuous changes of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Bengal and India. His evolving response to the British presence in India is interpreted as a double critique of both imperialist culture and its nationalist anti-colonial derivation. Key moments are highlighted that shaped his outlook as he broke with the swadeshi movement to aim at a larger interpretation of life.

Chapter Three engages with Tagore's intellectual arguments which aim to deconstruct the binary logic of colonial modernity so as to reposition India and the individual in a global framework. His universalist outlook is related to his experiment in education as well as his international career as a visvakabi ("world poet") after winning the Nobel Prize in 1913. I explore how Tagore's travels had brought alive for him some of his universalist ideals, and consider him in his role as a "cosmopolitan". Having related the impact of Tagore's travels to his world vision,

Chapter Four takes up Tagore's reputation in the West, more precisely Europe. I highlight diverse ways in which Europeans responded to Tagore, even as they drew on the common stock of perceptions that guided their imaginations of the East in the early decades of the twentieth century. His European reputation and fame was not a monolith, a point made clearer as we move away from the metropolitan centres of Western Europe to consider some specific responses to the Indian poet from Europe's Central and Eastern peripheries, including Slovenia.

Before moving onto the Kosovel part of the thesis, it must be noted that my analysis of Tagore's universalism derived primarily, if not exclusively, from his non-literary writings: his essays, foreign addresses, letters, with a focus on what Kosovel himself is known to have read. The socio-political thought of Tagore can be said to take precedence over Tagore the poet on these pages, but the shift in focus changes once we come to Kosovel. There, internationalism and universalism are closely related to the modernist shift occurring in Kosovel's poetic language, since much is to be gained also in seeing intellectual and social commitment in literary terms, where language, and how language is handled, becomes a crucial site of resistance. Because sensitive literary criticism of poetry requires solid knowledge of the original, and my Bengali is still basic, it is on these grounds that I have reserved the larger part of poetry analysis for Kosovel, though one or two key poems of Tagore do come up for a detailed discussion, in which case I read them with assistance in the original Bengali.[5]

On the other hand, Tagore was a mature thinker, even philosopher, who exerted a "considerable influence as a cultural mentor and socio-political critic on national and international scales", and this area, as recently noted by Joseph T. and Kathleen M. O'Connell, "remains challenging for further research" (2008: 946). In the final instance, my thesis hopes to contribute primarily to this area as Tagore's "mentorship" is explored for the first time in relation to one Slovenian poet, while simultaneously examined against a much wider historical context.

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[5] Tagore of course was a bilingual writer, who also translated himself into English. It is encouraging to know that, according to Uma Das Gupta, "almost forty per cent of his writing is in English", much of essayistic prose written directly in the language (2006: xv). Today his existing English writings are continuously expanded through new – and revised through improved – translations by the twin efforts of translators and editors both in India and Britain.

Chapter Five introduces Kosovel and establishes grounds for comparison as it situates the poet against the specific as well as larger historical forces, particularly those of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, which powerfully influenced his writing and concerns. The broader concept of situational identification is brought in as an alternative to the traditional model of influence. Throwing light on how precisely Tagore fitted into Kosovel's intellectual horizon: what the feelings, ideas, references and expectations were that he saw himself sharing with the Indian poet as he turned "Eastwards" for inspiration – provides the core concern that motivates both Kosovel chapters.

Chapter Six undertakes a close literary analysis of Kosovel's shift from romantic to avant-garde sensibility in the light of his endorsement of Tagore's universalist idea(l)s. If this stylistic shift has been understood entirely as the outcome of the poet's engagement with European literary avant-gardes, my reading accords a notable place to Tagore with respect to Kosovel personal avant-gardism, arguing in the process for a less Eurocentric approach to the so-called "peripheral" modernisms and/or avant-gardisms.

In the **Conclusion** I return to the key sets of questions that have framed this comparative study, namely: Tagore's intellectual and aesthetic impact on Kosovel, their underlying similarities and shared concerns, and finally, their "universalisms".

1. UNIVERSALISM: BETWEEN DOMINATION AND LIBERATION

> How to be free from arrogant nationalism is today the chief lesson to be learnt. Tomorrow's history will begin with a chapter on internationalism, and we shall be unfit for tomorrow if we retain any manners, customs, or habits of thought that are contrary to universalism.
>
> Tagore, "The Unity of Education", 1921

> Man is not a house made perfect. Man grows like a tree.
>
> Kosovel, notes

This chapter sets out to theoretically engage the topic of universalism by coming to it from the perspective of nationalism. The reason for this is simple: both Tagore and Kosovel, provoked by their respective historical positioning, wrote from the embattled middle ground between strategies of nationalism and universalism which contested each other as alternative or complementary forces to counter colonial domination. We have suggested that their notions of universalism emerged against the backdrop of political domination and that universalism is linked to the "deeply problematic enterprise" of nationalism (Said 1994: 258). Therefore it is necessary to engage with both concepts in the context of anti-colonial resistance to explore the way in which they relate to or depart from each other. This will lay the foundation for when we come to specifically examine the two writer's individual struggles and their respective answers.

I. Nationalism and a larger search for liberation

Historically, nationalism has resonated powerfully with ideas that signified anything from the most brutal repression to national emancipation and independence. In the words of Isaiah Berlin: "Nationalism is responsible for magnificent achievements and appalling crimes" (1997: 251). It has stood at both ends of the colonial/anti-colonial spectrum: as a vital force to counter subjugation or as resolute means of enforcing it. It seems "important immediately to remember", as Simon During submits, "that nationalism has different effects and meaning in a peripheral

['sic'] nation than in a world power" (1994: 139). Or, what Peter Hallward has rather provokingly suggested that "[w]hat determines the validity of any particular nationalist engagement is the nature of the *relation* involved (the nationalism that encourages imperialist aggression has *nothing* in common with the nationalism that resists it)" (emphasis authors, 2001: 129). Certainly, it seems that nationalism as a concept should not be removed from people's lived experience of it and while it can be linked as much to "a mode of freedom" (During 1994: 138-9) as to imperialist aggression, it is important to ask what the limitations of nationalism are in both cases.

To delimit what is clearly a broad and variously construed subject, we must state from the start that the nationalism that concerns us is one that broadly speaking developed in response to imperialism and is referred to variously as "anti-colonial nationalism", "resistant nationalism", "anti-imperial nationalist resistance" or even simply "anti-colonialism", though the latter is misleading in that it conflates anti-colonial with national, and not all anti-colonialisms were invariably nationalist (Boehmer 2002: 11). The other cue that will guide our discussion and help us refine our focus is taken from Benedict Anderson's influential study *Imagined Communities*: "Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being" (1991: 19).[1] Indeed, it has often been argued that the most powerful form of nationalism to have developed in resistance to colonial domination was cultural nationalism (During 1994: 139). In fact, it is true of both European and colonial nationalisms that "some form of national culture pre-existed the state" (Hobsbawm 1992: 10). When in the early nineteenth-century European thought, the ideas of "nation" and "culture" affiliate and become concomitant, that is what sent "individual cultures chasing after nationhood" (During 1994: 139).[2] In the context of anti-imperial resistance, "culturalism" too becomes a vital force, for "what is one defending *against* the encroachments of cultural, economic, military imperialism if not a culture?" (*Ibid.*).

[1] On the other hand, Anderson's placing of print capitalism at the heart of what makes "nationalisms" possible and comparable across the world will of course also inform this study, but more so in the context of global modernity and the notion of "virtual cosmopolis".

[2] For more on the two-way dialectics between nation as state and nation as culture and whether one pre-exists the other, cf. Easthope: 42-7.

Anti-colonial nationalisms

Historians and theorists generally agree that the modern idea of nation, the nation-state, and the language of nationalism are of Western origin.[3] Ideologically, their dominance was greatly consolidated by the European Enlightenment thought, whereby "nationalism" came to be seen as "the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress" (Chatterjee 1993: 2).

In the context of the colonial expansion of European nation-states the inherent contradiction in Western nationalist thought became glaringly apparent: based on the principles of peoples' rights to self-determination and personal liberty, it claimed this right for some while denying it to *others*. With colonial expansion, however, came also a rhetoric of cultural self-determination, and Boehmer is right to note "a certain poetic justice" in that colonial rule "produced the conditions for its own delegitimization". Because nationalism in the non-European world was historically linked to the colonial question, it became for any number of twentieth-century anti-colonial opposition movements "the platform for mobilizing against the occupying power in the name of a common culture, language, or history" (1995: 104-5), those doctrinal components of nationalism as they were invented by the liberal nineteenth-century European writers. It must be noted here that for Slovenes the nineteenth-century definition of the nation that focused on a distinctive language was readily assimilated into a cultural nationalism that affiliated a people with a language (and eventually territory and nation state), although initially in a variety of dialects that required "standardization" into a national literary language (Rusinow 2003: 19). South Asian, or more precisely, Indian context presents a very different case, and the next few pages will discuss the issue of anti-colonial nationalism with reference to Partha Chatterjee's seminal work on the subject.

Chatterjee has made us understand more clearly the inherent contradiction, and therefore weakness, of anti-colonial nationalism, which, he argues, comes from the fact that "even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based" (1993: 30). Insofar as it was a "derivative discourse" (a European import), its suitability for a people striving to contest the ideological hold that

[3] This is not to forget that the first "nationalisms", as Anderson's study argues, originated in the South and North Americas in the form of various creole-led *anti-colonial* movements in the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, predating "populist" nationalisms of Western Europe, which in turn predated nationalisms in Asia and Africa.

ostensibly justified their subjection rendered it highly problematic. Let us stay with Chatterjee's conceptual "formula", as he calls it, for reading anti-colonial nationalisms for a moment longer. Although he draws his theoretical conclusions from his observations of the anti-colonial nationalism of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal and India, there is a sense in which his important and widely recognized contribution to the debate on nationalism has a more general application.

Chatterjee passionately argues against the conventional narratives of nationalism, which, in aligning nationalism to a political movement, fail to see the autonomous, creative moments of anti-colonial resistance that began a lot earlier than "the political battle with the imperial power". It is in particular those aspects of Anderson's theory of nationalism that allegedly posit the historical experience of nationalism in Western Europe, Americas and Russia as the sole suppliers of "a set of modular forms" for all subsequent nationalisms in Asia and Africa that he finds unacceptable. For an author of the "derivative-discourse" theory to convey the essential mark of "third-world" nationalisms, or someone who only a few paragraphs earlier unambiguously states: "Whether of the 'good' variety or the 'bad', nationalism was entirely a product of the political history of Europe", the objection seems in the first instance baffling, even self-contradictory. However, we soon learn the real butt of Chatterjee's critique, which is clearly not the Western origin and spread of nationalism, but the all too familiar Eurocentric denial of agency to Asia and Africa, their confinement, in other words, to being mere "consumers of modernity", that is to say those whose imaginations were once and for all colonized (1999: 4-5).[4]

For Chatterjee, then, nationalist thought in the colonized world constitutes a "different" but "dominated" discourse (Bose and Jalal 2003: 122). Moreover, he introduces a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. The former, "'inner' domain", which bears "the 'essential' marks of cultural identity", is set in opposition to the material, or the outer reality of anti-colonial nationalism pertaining to matters of "state-craft, science and technology". This distinction enables him to concede a large measure of founding influence to the West in the outer realm of the material and the political, while claiming that anti-colonial nationalism "declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory". The social reform period, for example, is then

[4] I agree with Neil Lazarus in that Chatterjee's own tangle with "area specialists" can at times lead him to overstate the arguments of Benedict Anderson. See Lazarus 1999: 128-133.

seen to fall into two distinct stages: the early stage is informed by the influence of colonial authorities as the traditional institutions and customs are reformed, but the latter is characterised by "a strong resistance to allowing the colonial state to intervene in matters affecting 'national culture'". This second stage already constitutes the story of anti-colonial nationalism as a cultural mo(ve)ment, in which, according to Chatterjee, the colonial state is "kept out of the 'inner' domain of national culture". This is not to say that that so-called spiritual domain is left intact, but it is to underline the effort "to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture" as a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms. Or, put differently, the thrust behind imagining the "nation" into being is one of creating "a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western" (1999: 6).

While Chatterjee undoubtedly has good arguments for stressing how "the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West" (*Ibid.*: 5), there is something of a "difference-seeking distortion" to be noted there, as Bose and Jalal have rightly pointed out. Chatterjee does indeed privilege one type of response to the challenge of western modernity – his dichotomous formula is based on the nationalist thought of the late nineteenth-century Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee[5] – to the exclusion of many other responses, even within Bankim's own Hindu middle-class. In other words, not all colonized intellectuals fought the colonial present through creating "illusions about *our* past and denouncing *their* modernity". In fact, some of the more imaginative intellectual borrowings "consciously transgressed the frontier between 'us' and 'them'" (Bose and Jalal, emphasis theirs, 2003: 112-3), a point worth bearing in mind for when we come to consider Tagore (as well as Kosovel). Furthermore, to carve out a space for "our modernity" as opposed to "their modernity", or of colonial world and the West – what another critic sees as having become somewhat of "an academic orthodoxy" within the recent Indian scholarship – is not only historically untenable but runs the risk of "imposing the experience of the male middle class on the experience of all other sections of the colonized society". Even more, it ignores significant contributions made by those who belonged to "both blocks" and were driven by a search for "a sense of belonging within a larger universe" (Bhattacharya 2008: 7-9).

[5] For more on Bankim, cf.Chatterjee 1993: 54-84.

The lesson so far is that too sharply defined a fault-line between (Indian) tradition and (European) modernity does not allow us to fully appreciate the "contestations that animated the creative efforts to fashion a vibrant culture and politics of anti-colonial modernity" (Bose and Jalal 2003: 122). The imaginative force of cultural nationalism and anti-colonial modernity that Chatterjee also celebrates seems to have been unleashed precisely from transcending boundaries and not through re-asserting them.[6] Pushing beyond the language of binarism or rhetoric of difference is important if we are to understand that some "national or anti-colonial definitions of modernity aspired to be both different *and* universal" (*Ibid.*: 107).

The question on which much of the anti-colonial thought and politics effectively turned – and divided – was, it seems, on the position *vis-à-vis* the dominant Western (nationalist) discourse of modernity. Depending on whether the defining parameters of that position were those of imitation, appropriation, transformation, rejection, or any combination of these, it gave rise to what has now been recognised as "a much more variegated phenomenon than simply the articulate dissent of educated urban groups imbued with western concepts of liberalism and nationalism" (*Ibid.*: 107). The crucial shift in historiography's orientation towards the subaltern groups has also redefined the scope of the multiple competing narratives of anti-colonial nationalisms.

Certainly, anti-colonialism in its more generous moulds was never merely reactive, simply working in opposition to, or in mimicry of, Western ideas; rather it worked *through* them, or reworked them by fusing and adapting them to indigenous as well as other imported sources, at times reclaiming them in search of models of liberation that would include everyone, colonizer and colonized alike: " [...] the more imaginative strands of anti-colonial modernity fashioned a cultural and political space where there was no necessary contradiction between nationality and human community" (*Ibid.*: 123).

This is a vital insight, and one can think of a number of anti-colonial intellectuals who endorsed this broader view. One obvious example, and somewhat of a favourite among the theorists of anti-colonial resistance, is the Martinique-born psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Regardless of his own ethnic identity, Fanon not only identified himself wholesale with the Algerian people, taking up their cause of

[6] The boundaries of course were not only horizontal between the colonizer and the colonized but also vertical between the elites and subalterns – not to mention the many other divisions. The vertical limitations of nationalism must be kept in sight when we come to consider Tagore's anti-nationalist re-conceptualizations of society.

liberation, but his larger humanist vision aspired to "discover the man behind the colonizer", as he himself wrote in his *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, so as to eventually create "an Algeria that is open to all, in which every kind of genius may grow" (cited in Harrison 2003: 156). Let us go on to consider more carefully what characterizes this more particular response to colonial domination.

Resistance at its best: enlarging the self

Whatever there may be to level against Chatterjee's "formula", one cannot but take seriously his intellectual pursuit of challenging complacent assumptions that most, if not all, creative solutions are West-generated. While Bose and Jalal share this fundamental insight, they go further in identifying creative responses outside the set parameters of difference and domination, holding up Tagore as exemplar of this particular strain of anti-colonialism. Edward Said, for example, has also taken historians of "Third World nationalism" to task for not paying enough attention to the many different strands of nationalist thought across the colonized world. Though one might not necessarily agree with During that "nationalism in postcolonial nations has virtues that perhaps it lacks elsewhere", it seems to be the case that a variety of *emancipatory* nationalism has gone underrepresented in the debates on nationalism in general and anti-colonial nationalist resistance in particular.

Fully acknowledging the "abuses of statism, national chauvinism, and reactionary populism," Said urges us to consider whether that was *all* the anti-imperial nationalisms in India, Africa, and the Arab world had yielded (2001: 425). With reference to such "towering figures" as C. L. R. James, Pablo Neruda, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral and Rabindranath Tagore, to some extent also W. B. Yeats, he identifies "a fair number of nationalists who are wholehearted supporters of the national movement itself' and yet whose writings possess "a clear, if paradoxical, antinationalist theme" (2001: 425-6). Whether Tagore can justifiably be considered a nationalist, or how far he was a wholehearted supported of the national movement itself, will come up for discussion in the next chapter. In any case, Said's point is to argue that "at its best, nationalist resistance was always critical of itself' (1994: 264).

It becomes important then "to consider the intellectual and cultural argument" that emerged out of such resistance, and pay attention to the "new and imaginative reconceptions of society and culture", a task that awaits us with respect to Tagore and Kosovel. The self-critical component that Said identifies as the mark of

resistance at its best effectively signals a "pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation". For him, it constitutes "an alternative way of conceiving human history". Building on this premise, Said develops his theory of liberation, what he refers to as a "larger search for liberation" (*Ibid.*: 263-4; 260; 265).

There is clear progression in the phases of nationalist resistance that make up Said's liberation theory, evidently inspired by Fanon's charting of the stages in the nationalist struggle. It is a movement that would best be described as a movement *beyond* nationalism. Liberation as "the new alternative" requires what Fanon described as "a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness" (1963: 203). This does not mean abandoning one's sense of national selfhood, but it does mean overcoming "the emotional self-indulgence of celebrating one's own identity". In the context of anti-imperial nationalist resistance, it commands leaving the *nativist* position behind in order to embrace "a more generous pluralistic vision of the world" (Said 1994: 277). *Négritude* may by far the most well-known example of nativism, but nativism in the strict sense implies any essentialization of human identity evoked as much by *Indianness, Bengaliness, Slovenianness* as by the valorisations of "the Negro". What this suggests is that opposition to coercive colonial politics with its suppression of people's language(s) and culture will necessarily, at least to begin with, express itself in some form of nativism: a more or less narrow counter-assertion of an essentialized identity – "us" versus "them".

Romantic idealisations of the past, a return to roots, a pre-eminent search for lost authenticity, and above all, in Boehmer's apt formulation, "a strenuous defence of the virtues of native culture" (1995: 100) – are all symptomatic of assertive self-definitions aimed at re-establishing cultural integrity, and are readily available in all cultures that have had to struggle with colonial or other oppression. Yeats's Celticism certainly springs to mind as a nativist enterprise of this kind, a form of Irish *négritude*, as it were. Ironically Yeats's valorizations of "the Celt" converges with the attributes ascribed to "the Oriental", so that simplicity, naturalness, spirituality, innocence and so on, become tropes of anti-imperialist struggle in one discourse and tools of oppression in the other, attesting to the fact that nativism is but racism reversed.[7] While it may serve the purpose of importantly reviving the self-esteem of a down-trodden people, it ultimately fails to challenge imperialist

[7] Cf. Innes 2002 on this.

structures: "To accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself" (Said 1994: 277).

The movement from what Said terms "nationalist anti-imperialism" to "liberationist anti-imperialism" therefore requires a fundamental shift in perspective, a widening of consciousness, a breaking out of the binary opposition which comes with the awareness that identities, like cultures, are never fixed and homogenous but fluid and hybrid, and that the "history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings [...] common experiences, and interdependencies" (*Ibid.*: 261). Out of this awareness comes the revolutionary energy for displacing hierarchies rather than solely reverting them, for transgressing boundaries in favour of a more open "system of mobile relationships", a system that will inaugurate, as Nigel C. Gibson remarks with reference to Fanon – "a new human reciprocity" (2003: 181).

Staying with Gibson and Fanon for a moment longer, it is interesting to consider that, in Gibson's cogent analysis, Fanon effectively differentiates between *three* types of (anti-colonial) nationalist thought and politics, rather than the commonly theorized two. So, besides "a moderate and conformist nationalism" which he marks "nationalism 1," and "a militant nationalism (nationalism 2)", the former being the prerogative of the nationalist elites who, guarding their own interests, remain subordinate to external powers; and the latter belonging to national liberation groups such as FLN wanting genuine independence – there is "nationalism 3". This "unique conception of nationalism", unlike the other two, refuses to be bound by the simple logic of the colonizer versus the colonized. Its ambition is far more revolutionary in that it demands "the complex transformation of the colonized, not the simple departure of the colonizers" (Gibson 2003: 179-80). Only on the threshold of such a transformation will, Fanon portends, new humanity flourish, and this new humanity is grounded on what Said, citing from Fanon, has developed into his theory of *liberation*: "Liberation is consciousness of self, 'not the closing of a door communication', but a never-ending process of 'discovery and encouragement' leading to true national self-liberation and to universalism" (Said 1994: 282).

With this, the anti-colonial struggle gets recast in psychological terms, transposed into the domain of individual and collective self-consciousness. What lies at the heart of *liberation, nationalism 3,* or *new humanism* is therefore "consciousness of self" as the precondition and consequence of (national) *self*-liberation leading to universalism. Gibson describes it thus: "This 'self' which does

not close the door to communication develops by undergoing mediation (and therefore self-negation) and only then embraces the other in mutual recognition" (2003: 189). The dialectics between self and other through interaction or communication carries the potential of resolving itself on a higher plane of mutual recognition, whereby the other is embraced as part of a larger self-definition. In the context of India, as Ashis Nandy too has suggested, the cultural forces that were unleashed in the colonial encounter and which "fractured the personality of every sensitive exposed Indian", also "set up the West as a crucial vector within the Indian self" (1983: 89). The other does not have to be an external menacing presence but can become an integral part of the enlarged self.

There is a more general point to be made here as regards culture and the "I/we" that is central to it. The political theorist Seyla Benhabib puts it succinctly: "We should view human cultures as constant creations, recreations and negotiations of imaginary boundaries between 'we' and the 'other(s)'. The 'other' is always also within us and is one of us" (2002: 8). Indeed, if we are to speak sensibly about cultures, we must not only acknowledge that change and transformation are at the heart of any culture's existence and that there is an on-going process of transculturation at work (Ashcroft 2001: 24), but it also becomes necessary to translate the imaginary lines between cultures into something that is internal rather than external to the culture itself. Put differently, as Nandy pointed out with reference to Tagore, it becomes necessary "to convert the self-other debates into the self-self debate" (2005a: 82).

To return to the question of nationalism, a national selfhood then is developed in the context of interrelationship, not only derivative but also absorbing of "alien" cultural formations, and nationalist discourse, as argued by Boehmer, is not necessarily "a purely oppositional, or purely inwardly directed discourse", but rather "multi-layered and polyphonic, a site of enunciation to which different agents may lay claim" (2002: 7). Said's underscoring of the self-critical dimension inherent in the more generous forms of anti-colonial nationalist thought; its co-extensiveness with "humanity" rather than "the nation", is a fitting perspective with regards to our topic. It has since been promoted by several other postcolonial critics. Neil Lazarus, for example, underscores the important role of the so-called "Third-world" intellectuals in opening up horizons and contesting received forms of knowledge – the "fundamentally *universalistic* gesture", as he puts it, of such intellectual practice.

It is a gesture "directed through and beyond the nodal point of the nation to a proleptic space of *internationalism*" (emphasis author's, 1999: 141).

The question of internationalism is indeed important, and allows us to re-think the concept of nation and cultural resistance. Taking inspiration from Frantz Fanon's famous proposition that "[n]ational consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension" (1963: 247)[8], Homi Bhabha has significantly problematized the imagined unity of the nation, raising the question of boundaries so as to evoke the ambivalent margins of the nation-space. The "*inter*national dimension" that Fanon speaks of Bhabha posits as much within the "margins of the nation-space" as "in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples". National culture cannot be located in any precise and bounded manner: "it is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it". The boundary itself is "Janus-faced": "the problem of the outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic [...]". It is this "ambivalent nation-space" that Bhabha signposts as "the crossroads to a new transnational culture". In its fundamental insight it is, he suggests, "anti-nationalist" (emphasis author's, Bhabha 1990: 4). That would be to say, it is diametrically opposed to evocations of unified and homogenous nation that serve to mask and override cultural difference.[9]

The anti- or post-nationalist inflections of the national question that formed the subject of our discussion so far – captured in paradoxical formulations such as "anti- or post-nationalist nationalists" (Said 1994: 270), or Bhabha's "anti-nationalist, ambivalent nation space" – point not only to the conceptual indeterminacy of the subject at hand but also convey the need to retain the category of "nation" even as gesturing towards its displacement. It is time we brought into the discussion the – similarly elusive and problematic – notion of "universality".

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[8] This citation can be paired up with another oft-quoted statement: "It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows" (Fanon 1963: 247-8).

[9] Anthony Easthope's notion of "national desire", the "thirst for unity" that fuels "a single, mastering identity" and coercive nationalist politics, seems pertinent in this context (Easthope 1999: 42-57 [49]).

II. Debating universalism

Nationalism, as we have seen in part one of the chapter, subsumes a wide range of positions. The arguments put forward by Said, Bose and Jalal, Lazarus and others, insist on discriminating between nationalisms, retaining in sight a strain that can be linked to freedom and liberation. Not only are the concepts of nation and national identity central to our discussion of universalism, but the terminological and conceptual tangle – "the tug-of-war over a word" (Appiah 2005: 242) – bears crucially on both concepts.

Given the vastness and long history of the topic, which has its claimants and rejecters across the board of social, political and cultural theory, engaging philosophers and literary critics alike, it is essential to try and define our focus on universalism from the start. Since Tagore and Kosovel can be, broadly speaking, approached as thinkers and poets of decolonization, or liberation, the logical direction is to consider universalism between the opposing ends of domination and liberation: universalism-as-hegemony and universalism-as-emancipation. Though I do not wish to confine myself to the postcolonial paradigm, an understanding of the debate on universality and universalism that has animated postcolonial theorists will introduce some of the key issues related to the concept, demonstrating in particular the grounds of its critique. It is namely within this field (and cultural studies more broadly), especially in the more theoretical strain informed by poststructuralist thought, that universality came under severe attack, perceived not only as anachronistic but also as dangerous.[10] However, over the last decade or so, the pendulum of critique, also among the postcolonial critics, seems to have swung back in the opposite direction. In Amanda Anderson's words:

> One of the more remarkable developments in contemporary cultural criticism has been the surge of interest in the idea of and history of universalism [...] Partly in reaction of the excesses of identity politics, and partly in response to the political and ethical impasses of a strictly negative critique of Enlightenment, a number of theorists have begun to re-examine universalism, asking how we might best combine the critique of partial or false universals with the pursuit of those emancipatory ideals associated with traditional universalism (1998: 265).

[10] Spivak, for example, leaves little scope for debate: "[T]here can be no universalist claims in the human sciences" (cited in Hallward 2001: 176).

There have indeed been several notable contributions, arguing staunchly for the need to retain the category of universality.[11] "The attempt to dismiss [the notion of the universal] *theoretically* and in general places one in an impossible position", writes Nicholas Harrison, saying it is necessary "to protect at once a certain notion of the universal" (2003: 153). Similarly Neil Lazarus claims it is "vital to retain the categories of [both] 'nation' and 'universality'" (1999: 143). And Patrick Colm Hogan makes a related claim for the need to defend universality, saying that "genuine universalism is the only way in which we can recognize the common humanity and thus the shareable value of distinct instatiations" (Hogan 2000: xvii). If universalism stands in such need of a defence, we might start by asking what the problem with universalism is.

What is wrong with universalism?

I begin with reference to one of the seminal anthologies of post-colonial theory and criticism, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995) edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (the already famous trio of *The Empire Writes Back* [1989]), which devotes an entire section to "universality and difference", as well as their glossary of essential concepts in post-colonial theory, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2000). For a book that in its introduction proclaims to explain "the most important terms and concepts in English in post-colonial theory by providing an insight into their genesis and by offering an account of *the range of meanings* with which they have been deployed", the treatment of the notion of "universalism/universality" is strikingly univalent, formulated strictly in negative terms (emphasis authors', 2002: 2; entry found on 235-7).

Notions of universality, according to Ashcroft and others, are grounded in the essentialist assumption that "there are irreducible features of human life and experience that exist beyond the constitutive effects of local cultural condition" (*Ibid.*: 235). Such a universalist premise, with its reliance on common humanity and the idea that members of different cultures share "fundamental cognitive, emotive, ethical, and other properties and principles", to draw, in part, on Hogan's definition of universalism – and he, unlike the authors of the glossary, would not discredit the notion of common humanity or human nature (2000: xv) – is bound to work against

[11] A special spring 1995 issue of the feminist journal *differences* was brought out in defense of universalism. Cf. Lazarus et al 1995; Balibar 1995.

vital recognition of cultural difference. Why the authors object to what they call "the myth of universality" is therefore not just because, in their view, universal features of humanity are pure fiction, part of the old nineteenth-century liberal-humanist vocabulary, but also – and primarily – because such ostensibly universalizing notions wash out cultural difference, by working to impose on others what is in fact the local masquerading as "universal" (Ashcroft et al 2002: 235). In short, universalist assumptions are reductive and essentialist, perceived to be linked with totalizing imperialist ambitions:

> The assumption of universalism is a fundamental feature of the construction of colonial power because the 'universal' features of humanity are the characteristics of those who occupy positions of political dominance (Ashcroft et al 1995: 55).

What impels the authors' anti-universalist stance is clearly the view that universalism is by definition a hegemonic discourse, projecting Western values embedded in Western interests as *the* way to be. It is presumptuous at best and totalitarian at worst. Indeed, no one would want to dispute the historical link between this mode of universalism and the project of (neo-)imperialism, and it is not difficult to see why (a particular notion of) universality and universalism would be at odds with the postcolonial vocabulary concerned with difference, the specific and the particular; but this argument seems a little too rash in its categorical rejection of universality simply because of the ideological abuses history has put it to.

Without going too far into the discussion, the philosophical dimensions of which are in any case beyond the scope of this thesis, it is relevant to consider the question that seems to fuel much of the contention surrounding universalism, namely, whether one upholds the notion of universals or not. There are, of course, various dimensions to this question and these get progressively more difficult to answer. Appiah, for instance, who also does not object to the older argument of evoking human essences, believes in "such a thing as a universal human biology [...] biological human nature [...] shaped by more than 99 percent of our genes that we all share" (2005: 252). Universality on the level of human species apart, cross-cultural research also points to "some basic mental traits that are universal", that is to say found in every human population (*Ibid.* 2007: 96). Language – if language is a mental trait – would most certainly be one. Though there is indeed a great deal of variety amongst cultures, pro-universalists would point out that there is also much

that is shared between societies, not least because of the shared problems of the human situation. Appiah offers a sample list, based on Donald Brown's research in his book *Human Universals* (1991):

> [...] practices like music, poetry, dance, marriage, funerals; values resembling courtesy, hospitality, sexual modesty, generosity, reciprocity, the resolution of social conflict; concept such as good and evil, right and wrong, parent and child, past, present, and future (2007: 96-7)

If one then need not be too skeptical about the notion of universals, one should not get too optimistic either, for "a shared biology or a natural human essence does not give us, in the relevant sense, a shared ethical nature" (Appiah 2005: 252). It is precisely in the realm of human values that assumptions of universality become more problematic and where consequently much of the pro- and anti-universalist argumentation takes place. Though, even here, pro-universalists, as we shall see, have been adamant in saying that the historicist and relativist positions need not be incompatible with the notion of universals.

Let us, however, come back to our discussion of universalism linked to imperial hegemony. While we can understand why "the historical legitimacy provided to imperialism by three of the most powerful universalist ideologies of the West, Christianity, Liberalism, and Marxism, has made universalism an object of suspicion", we should also note that "there is no straightforward argument demonstrating that universalism is necessarily imperialist" (Mehta 2000: 622). Indeed, when the major novelist and theorist of post-colonial literatures Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o refers to himself as "an unrepentant universalist" (1993: xvii), it can only be presumed that there must be more to universalism than meets the post-colonial eye of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. Ngũgĩ's universalism – and his political imagination engages an unremitting call for "a plurality of centres all over the world" and the "possibilities of opening out the mainstream to take in other streams" (*Ibid.*: 11; 8) – has little in common with the absolutist pretensions of the imperialist brand. In fact Ngũgĩ himself acknowledges the dangers of such lofty a type of universalism that posits a transcendent, ahistorical subject that Ashcroft and company so rightly object to:

> Coming from that part of the globe, called, for lack of a better word, the Third World, I am suspicious of the uses of the word and the concept of the universal. For very often, this has meant the West generalising its experience of history as the universal experience of the world [...] what is Western becomes universal and what is Third World becomes local. [...] One historical particularity is generalised into a timeless and spaceless universality (*Ibid.*: 25).

Ngũgĩ's own *universalist* aspirations must be then of a different order. Hogan aptly dubs it "particularist universalism" to suggest "the deep compatibility of universalism and particularism" (2000: xvii). It is something that Ngũgĩ himself explicitly ascribes to – "the universal is contained in the particular just as the particular is contained in the universal" (Ngũgĩ 1993: 26) – to on the one hand overcome the isolation of particular cultures while posit the very particularities of cultures as a basis for their overcoming. His universalist ideal envisages a world where "the wealth of a common global culture will [...] be expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers. The 'flowerness' of the different flowers is expressed in their very diversity. But there is cross-fertilisation between them. And what is more they all contain in themselves the seeds of a new tomorrow" (*Ibid.*: 24).[12]

Ngũgĩ is just one among many "cultural intellectuals" to take from Jameson to denote their double engagement with both "poetry and praxis" (Jameson 1986: 75-6), and who are not "afraid to ground [their] position in those older categories of universalism and true humanism" (Childs and Williams 1997: 61). To some extent this response was brought on by – and directed at – the failure of the Enlightenment project, the principles of which the imperialist nations had abused for their own ends, so that humanism and universalism needed to be reclaimed for the whole of humanity. In the words of Fanon: "This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others" (1963: 246). If colonization is essentially dehumanizing – and Amié Césaire terms it "thingification" (1972: 21) – then to close the gap between man and man, the colonizer and the colonized, it is necessary, as Tagore put it, to "awaken their humanity by our own" (1961c: 138). It is on this impulse, it seems to me, that Fanon urged that a "new humanism" be defined at the

[12] Ngũgĩ's "Afro-centric" position in the so-called "language debate" is an interesting one to consider with respect to his universalism. The close association Ngũgĩ perceives between language and culture, the former seen as a cultural reservoir of the latter, leads him to reject colonial tongues as a necessary step in "decolonizing the mind". For more see Lazarus 1993; Mazrui 1993.

Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Rome in 1959. The only way out of the "absurd drama others have staged round me" is to break out of the racialized binarism of the colonial imagination, and, "through one human being [...] reach out for the universal" (Fanon 1986: 197).

Clearly then universalism cannot be exhausted by the definition found in the two post-colonial compendiums referred to above. To see it solely as a grand Western imperialist narrative geared to dominate "the Other" is to ignore a major strain of universalist thought launched in opposition to imperialism, or for that matter independently of it, and commit the mistake of what Nicholas Harrison has called a "tendentious 'definition' of universalism/universality" (2003: 153). Such a reading fails to acknowledge, or distinguish between, the diverse universalist discourses which straddle both ends of the imperialist/anti-imperialist divide. Ironically, by monopolizing the concept as the sole domain of Western modernity, it perpetuates the very hegemonic drive of Western discourse it purportedly seeks to undermine.

Furthermore, to frame the intellectual legacy of modernity, and this is to repeat what has been said earlier, as a divide between the West claiming to be universal and the non-West striving to be different, is to endorse a model that is ultimately disabling, because, if nothing else, it is false. It needs to be said time and again, it seems, as Kenan Malik did, speaking in the aftermath of 9/11:

> The Western tradition is not Western in any essential sense, but only through an accident of geography and history. Indeed, Islamic learning provided an important source of both the Renaissance and the development of science. Many of the ideas we call 'Western' are, in fact, universal, laying the basis as they do for greater human flourishing (Malik 2002).[13]

He is right also in pointing out that many of the past century radicals, especially third world radicals, understood that the problem of imperialism was not in being a Western ideology, but in being "an obstacle to the pursuit of the progressive ideals that arose out of the Enlightenment" (*Ibid.*).

[13] At the conference, *After 11 September: Fear and Loathing in the West*, held at the Institute in London on 26 May, 2002.

Eurocentrism: false or pseudo universalism

The skeptical anti-universalist position discussed so far, which is grounded in the more general opposition to Enlightenment humanism, has since met with several objections. The pro-universalist camp, prominently Marxist in orientation, has been at pains to point out that this critique rests on a terminological as well as a conceptual muddle: on mistaking Eurocentrism for universalism. The very opening paragraph of Samir Amin's thought-provoking book *Eurocentrism* lays bare the threads of this argument:

> Eurocentrism is a culturalist phenomenon in the sense that it assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time (1989: vii).

Hence, according to Amin, the real basis of the anti-universalist attack is not universalism at all, or even the universalist pretentions of the European Enlightenment, but its Eurocentric ideological appropriation (a part and parcel of the capitalist mode of production). If modern culture's claim is that it is founded on humanist universalism, then in its Eurocentric variety, it undermines its own claim. Without negating the purchase of the founding idea, Amin sees the challenge in elaborating "a universalism liberated from the limits of Eurocentrism" (*Ibid.*: 114-6).

Kwame Appiah has defended universalism along similar lines: "It is characteristic of those who pose as antiuniversalists to use the term *universalism* as if it meant *pseudouniversalism*, and the fact is that their complaint is not with universalism at all. What they truly object to – and who would not? – is Eurocentric hegemony *posing* as universalism" (cited in Hogan 2000: xvi).[14] Over a decade later he felt compelled to reiterate the same point:

> But, of course, Hume's or Kant's or Hegel's inability to imagine that an African could achieve anything in the sphere of 'arts and letters' is objectionable not because it is humanist or universalist but because it is neither. What has motivated this recent antiuniversalism has been, in large part, a conviction that past universalism was a projection of European values and interests. This is a critique best expressed by the

[14] Original citation in Appiah 1992: 58.

> statement that the actually existing Enlightenment was insufficiently Enlightened; it is not an argument that Enlightenment was the wrong project (Appiah 2005: 250).[15]

Two related claims appear to drive these arguments. One is that the term of universalism/universality be unhinged from its associations with the Eurocentric notional imputation and opened up for a fresh reassessment. And the second is that the project of Enlightenment, by laying the legal and moral foundations for equality and respect among *all* human beings, was not a misplaced one, even as it clearly remains an unfinished one. The question therefore is not whether to reject universalism but how to further its pursuit. This takes us to the heart of today's socio-political and philosophical debate, which I can only hope to address cursorily on these pages.[16] I will briefly outline three major arguments underpinning the resurgent interest in universalism and the growing belief in its necessity as a theoretical concept.

The first argument relates to the reality of our contemporary world poised precariously between the multiple pulls of "global integration" on the one hand and "sociocultural disintegration" on the other, and is given credence by the political philosopher Seyla Benhabib in her advocacy of "a pluralistically enlightened ethical universalism". Because today we effectively live in a global situation that is "creating real confrontations between cultures, languages, and nations", with people's lives being impinged on in any number of ways, we have, she argues, "a *pragmatic* imperative to understand each other and to enter into a cross-cultural dialogue" (emphasis author's). Insofar as this global "community of interdependence [...] resolves to settle issues of common concern to all via dialogical procedures in which all are participants" we will have "a moral community". The "all" she refers to is indeed "all of humanity", but not because, she is trying to "invoke some philosophical essentialist theory of human nature, but because the condition of planetary interdependence has created a situation of worldwide reciprocal exchange, influence, and interaction" (Benhabib 2002: 36).

The second argument similarly posits a universalist outlook as being mandated by the situation of global interdependency, but this time the category commanding the discovery of possible general laws that govern societies is that of

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[15] For further discussion, cf. Appiah 2005: 219-20 and 258-9. For the same type of argument, cf. also Lazarus and collaborators 1995: 78-79; Hallward 2001: 177-9.

[16] For a succinct account of the more philosophical arguments to this debate, see Benhabib, pp. 26-7.

the capitalist system. "The global purchase of actually existing capitalism *obliges* us to develop concepts adequate to its systematicity", write Lazarus and his collaborators, in many ways joining hands with Amin. Imposed on a worldwide scale, capitalism, as it were, "created a demand for universalism as much at the level of scientific analysis of society as at the level of elaboration of a human project capable of transcending its historical limits" (Lazarus et al 1995: 103). In striving to fashion the latter, these critics make it imperative to take on the false universalism espoused by bourgeois culture (i.e. capitalist ideology that in great part overlaps with the Eurocentrism as Amin defines it), but rather than adopting an anti-universalist stance, whether of the ideological left or right, they opt for a *radicalized* universalist position. They refuse to surrender the concept of universality either to the bourgeois ideologues or concede theoretical ground to contemporary post-theories with their proclamation of the death of the universalist ideal and the attendant categories of "reason", "truth" and "logic". Instead they opt for a kind of third position from which they can defend the "universalistic claims of scientific knowledge" against "various counter-enlightenment attacks" (*Ibid.*: 77-8). Again, they would say, it is too little enlightenment, not too much, that is the problem.

Lastly, instead of laying the perspective of universality aside as an antiquated totalitarian framework, pro-universalists argue that some sort of a universal dimension must be retained so as to avoid the pitfalls of cultural relativism, of ending up with cultural enclaves or mutually impenetrable worlds. Appiah's complaint with antiuniversalism seems justified when he says that antiuniversalism "protects difference at the cost of partitioning each community into a moral world of its own" (2005: 249). Such a strict relativist or particularist position is of course "historically and empirically indefensible". Cultural interpenetration is a fact of history, and no less so today when, as Ulrich Beck argues, it is necessary that we accept and work with our "intercultural destiny":

> [T]here are no separate worlds (our misunderstandings take place within a single world). The global context is varied, mixed, and jumbled – in it, mutual interference and dialogue (however problematic, incongruous, and risky) are inevitable and ongoing (2004: 436-7).

If universalism is problematic because, through its promotion of what is shared between cultures and individuals, it can obliterate particularities – and such insensitivity to difference can acquire malicious forms indeed – there is also much cause for concern when cultures are defined strictly along the lines of difference. The former would accept "the other" only in terms of sameness, but in the latter the supposed incommensurability of cultures precludes any meaningful dialogue or understanding. The difference-seeking or particularist approach is also inherently inconsistent, since "upholding differences among groups typically entails the erasure of differences within groups" (Appiah 2005: 254). Its tendency is to homogenize identity on both ends of the cross-cultural divide. Some critics have become highly skeptical of the whole concept of "cross-cultural difference". If not altogether abandoned, it should at least be restricted in the way it is used within contemporary cultural theory, since it commits what Appiah has rightly called a "characteristically modern mistake": the assumption that "international difference [...] is an especially profound kind of something called 'cultural difference'" (*Ibid.*). Insofar as one argues that there are differences among groups which substantially complicate what we think of as cross-cultural understanding, it is important to remember that often the differences and the difficulties are no less prominent within societies themselves (cf. Benhabib 2002: 25). Indeed, no one would dare suggest that dialogue or agreement, particularly when distances between beliefs, experiences and practices are substantial, come easily – historical record testifies to the opposite – but this, true universalists will go on saying, is no reason to stop trying.

New universalism: striving for the unattainable?

From the discussion so far, it appears that cultural relativists are as vulnerable to charges of essentialising as are universalists. Writing from their own historically and culturally contingent positions, universalists may elevate what is local and specific to the status of the universal, but cultural relativists, with their predilection for difference, can succumb to reification and particularistic closures. Clearly, both positions are equally undesirable, not least because they form the extreme ends of the relativist/universalist debate.

Can there be a third position: a way of engaging the positive face of both universalism and relativism?[17] Is it possible to conceive of the relation between the particular and the universal outside the either/or matrix, and have an alternative to a universalism that eliminates difference, or to a particularism that rejects the possibility of developing any general principles? For indeed, the universalism that concerns us, and which has been dubbed by the various theorists I have been referring to as *new*, *genuine* or *progressive* universalism to mark it off from the old-style imperialist, or new-style neo-colonial, brands, recasts the terms of this debate along the premise that similarity (what is shared, universal) and difference (what is local, particular) are not incommensurable but mutually dependent and constitutive (think of Ngũgĩ's "particular universalism" mentioned earlier). They are composite parts of the same continuum. Hence, universalism, as Hogan emphatically notes, is "not at all a matter of everyone having the same culture," but rather it provides the only rationale for "all cultures being preserved in their uniqueness". Respect for different cultures, he concludes, "is not the antithesis of universalism, but a *consequence* of universalism (emphasis author's, 2000: xvii-iii).

Point taken, but this still leaves the question of (new) universality unanswered. Hogan's vital recuperation of the term is quite unambiguously grounded in the belief in universal humanity – "all people share universal feelings, propensities, rights, and our various cultures all develop out of these shared feelings, propensities, rights" (*Ibid.*), and while some might not share his optimism for what would be seen as Western discourse of global human rights,[18] Hogan does in fact problematize the notion of universality. To explain away the conceptual muddle discussed in the previous section, he sees false universality as an outcome of the psychological mechanism of *projection*. Namely, in contrast to "the unself-conscious assumption that everyone thinks the same ways I do", (true) universalism "involves a *self-conscious* effort to understand precisely what is common across different cultures – empirically, normatively, experientially [...] (emphasis added)." In that sense he acknowledges the precarious nature of (true) universality, which can always turn against itself "when anti-universalist tendencies arise, consciously or unconsciously" (Hogan 2000: xvi).

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[17] I take a cue from Beck's helpful analysis here, where each of the contended –isms (nationalism, universalism, relativism and ethnicism) is seen to have "two faces". Cf. Beck 2004.

[18] Cf. "[...] it is only on the basis of universal ethical principles that we can forcefully condemn either indigenous or metropolitan practices – from Indian *sati* to American slavery, to British colonialism itself" (Hogan 2000: 309).

Others have been perhaps more explicit in inflecting the category of universality through the mirror of humanity's patently darker side. Writing in the wake of growing nationalist unrests in France, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, Julia Kristeva wrote:

> Yes, let us have universality for the rights of man, provided we integrate in that universality not only the smug principle according to which "all men are brothers" but also that portion of conflict, hatred, violence, and destructiveness that for two centuries since the *Declaration* has ceaselessly been unloaded upon the realities of wars and fratricidal closeness and that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious tells us is a surely modifiable but yet constituent portion of the human psyche (1993: 27).

What Kristeva conveys more forcefully than Hogan is the need to see the human condition as a nexus of abstract, but vital, principles and destructive, if modifiable, tendencies. What, in her view, makes universality an enabling concept is the recognition gleaned from psychoanalysis that strangeness – or "the Other" – is to be reckoned with within ourselves: "let us know ourselves as unconscious, altered, other in order to approach the universal otherness of the strangers that we are – for only strangeness is universal" (*Ibid.*: 21). To give validity to this important truth, Kristeva maintains, will enable us to treat differences as essentially constitutive of our own selves, and perhaps then it will not be necessary to consolidate our sense of (important) self in opposition to an outside other (cf. Anderson 1998: 285).

This kind of an intervention has also been employed to rethink the notion of multiculturalism. Against the violence of the twentieth century, Ashis Nandy has suggested that multiculturalism "should not invoke an inventory of cultures, but a multilayered self, in which the others are telescoped into the self, so much so that the self cannot be described without the others" (2003: 272).[19] Such interpenetration between self and other radically destabilizes notions of bounded and pure identities, and indicates a relationship between "the particular" and "the universal" that is open-ended and on-going.

In contrast then to the old universalism which rests on the false dichotomy between "us" and "them", new universalism is altogether more guarded about identities:

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[19] This seems to a rewriting of the quote that had appeared in an earlier publication, cf. Nandy 2002: 223. "[Multiculturalism] should not invoke an inventory of cultures, but a multi-layered self, constantly in dialogue with others, conceptualised not as distant strangers but as alien fragments of the self".

> When we pose the question 'Is Universalism ethnocentric?' do we take account of [the] complex global dialogue across cultures and civilizations? ... The question 'Is Universalism ethnocentric?' presupposes that we know who the 'West and its others', or in Tzvetan Todorov's famous words – *'Nous et les autres'* – are (1993). But who are we? Who are the so-called others? Are they really our others? (Benhabib 2002: 25)

This is not to say that differences are unimportant or that they do not exist, but it is to realize that differences are, in the words of Alain Badiou, "already abundant in one and the 'same' individual" (2005: 11). Badiou's interpretation of the universalist outlook of Saint Paul plays on the ambiguities of the construction of difference: "For although it is true, so far as what the event constitutes is concerned, that there is 'neither Greek nor Jew', *the fact is* that there are Greeks and Jews" (Badiou 2003: 100). One could even maintain, as Badiou muses, that there is nothing but differences. It is precisely at this crucial juncture that universality comes into its own as the creating of something that moves beyond – or rather *works through* – established and evident differences:

> Nevertheless, these fictitious beings, these opinions, customs, differences, are that to which universality is addressed; that toward which love is directed; finally that which must be traversed in order for universality itself to be constructed (*Ibid.*).

Universality thus becomes a category that is constantly in the making, always yet to be achieved. If in its traditional disguise it was posited as "a judgement", a foundation or a fixture, it is now perceived as a moment of "becoming indifferent to difference". To create something universal – what Badiou terms "an event", "a truth" – means to go beyond evident differences, but not in the sense of enacting another particularist closure but in the sense of "of maintaining a noncomformity with regards to that which is always conforming us" (*Ibid.*: 110). The "always" here is, needless to say, historically, culturally and personally contingent. For indeed, once we move away from the rather abstract and theoretical discussion of universalism and locate Tagore's and Kosovel's ideas and practices of "universalism" in their particular historical context, it will become clearer that particular histories of universalisms are integrally linked to the histories of production of difference (the difference for instance, between Slavs and Italians, or "East" and "West", and so on).

To finish the theoretical discussion as regards the universal and the particular, however, a certain paradox must be acknowledged. Ernesto Laclau explains it well: "universality is incommensurable with any particularity [and] yet cannot exist apart from the particular". Or put differently: "the particular exists only in the contradictory movement of asserting a differential identity and simultaneously cancelling it [...]". It is essential, Ernesto Laclau argues, that the paradox remain unsolved, for true democracy depends on it. For the minute the paradox is solved, this means that "a particular body had been found that was the *true* body of the universal". Democratic interaction is made possible precisely because "the universal does not have any necessary body, any necessary content" and different groups can compete to "give their particular aims a temporary function of universal representation" (1992: 89-90).

When Chinua Achebe proclaimed in his essay on colonialist criticism, "I should like to see the world *universal* banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world" (Achebe 1995: 60), the source of his grievance is self-evident enough. And yet – what ironically defeats the purpose of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, who included Achebe's essay in their post-colonial compendium as evidence of his anti-universalist stance – Achebe does not, if we read his quote carefully, throw the notion of universality out of the window. True, we might argue, he may as well have done, for when will our horizon ever extend to include the entire world? – but to say that is to miss the point. Any critique of *false* universalism is possible only against an invocation of, to borrow from Lazarus and his co-authors, "the regulative ideal of genuine universalism" (1995: 88). In other words, behind the manifest false universality there is such a thing as genuine, true universality. Posited on this fine line between "false" and "genuine", it is always in danger of turning against itself. To evoke it is to evoke its limitations and the (self-conscious) effort to transcend them. Any articulation of the universal is inherently anti-universalist. So rather than as an actuality, universality is there as a receding goal: "The universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining it, but as an incomplete horizon, suturing a dislocated particular identity". The new universal is "the symbol of a missing fullness" (Laclau 1992: 89). Its evocation remains crucial, because it is regulative.

What of cosmopolitanism?

Before we go on to consider Tagore's contribution to universalist thought, a mention must be made of another embattled concept that often crops up in discussions of culture and identity. Some understanding of the deployment of the notion cosmopolitan/ism in the more recent developments is necessary to bring our more theoretical discussion of universalism to a close.

Although the two terms universalism and cosmopolitanism have distinct histories, in many ways they bear closely on each other. Notional hybrids such as "universalist cosmopolitanism" testify to their close bearing (Appiah 2005: 219-20; 258-9). Indeed the revisions of cosmopolitanism animating contemporary social and cultural criticism run in close parallel with similar efforts that have recuperated universalism as a theoretically viable concept. In the same way that theorists of diversity have adopted labels such as "new", "genuine" and "true" universalism to advance a universalism sensitive to difference and differentiate it from its "older" hegemonic variety that promotes similitude across cultures, cosmopolitanism too has been given a new lease of life away from largely imperialist associations and negative post-Enlightenment associations (i.e. privileged mode of detachment or not belonging, imposed acculturation, etc.) to versatile reconsiderations of its emancipatory and ethical potential.[20] This can be seen, in part, as a response and reaction against resurgent nationalisms and excesses of identity politics across the world (Anderson 1998: 266). Or, conversely, since nationalism has "acquired some fresh legitimacy in the intellectual circles" as a consequence to the end of the Cold War, cosmopolitanism and universalism too have been emboldened, partly as a reaction (Malcomson 1998: 234).

Without resorting to the amalgamation of the two terms, it does appear that there is significant overlap or traffic between them in the way they are being used in theoretical writing. Anderson has, however, helpfully pointed out that there is a sense in which universalism is a more philosophically ambitious term and cosmopolitanism a worldlier concept, the former confined to more theoretical discourses and the latter to more literary and essayistic genres. There can be parity between them, one that suggests complementariness: "Universalism needs the rhetoric of wordliness that cosmopolitanism provides" (1998: 272).

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[20] For an analysis of the genealogy of the term and its relationship to universalism, see Anderson 1989. For the term's complex history cf. also Mehta 2000: 620-4.

New conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism emphatically strive for, along similar lines to articulations of new universalism, the embattled middle ground that avoids the pitfalls of abstract normative universalism on the one hand and cultural relativism on the other, or, put differently, "the logic of assimilation that eroded difference" and "an enclavism that made dialogue impossible" (Mehta 2000: 623). Without denying the inevitable claims of "our locations, our embeddedness in particular cultures and contexts", new cosmopolitans envision "diverse modes of transcending, displacement, detachment" but without "the expectation that this process will result in the same constellation above us." The amorphous "we" of humanity is no longer the prescribed investment that must displace particular affective affiliations – and cosmopolitans nowadays generally accept that being a citizen of the world is a cosmopolitan myth[21] –; rather, the goal is to more "effectively pluralize our attachments [and] enhance our solidarities" against a fundamental recognition of the already existing complex "macrointerdependencies that affect us" (*Ibid.*).[22] The belief in universal humanity – a cornerstone of cosmopolitan/universalist ethics – remains necessary for recognizing a possible larger "we", but its objective is no longer some universal standard but rather an advocacy of mutually "transformative encounters between strangers variously construed" (Anderson 1998: 274).

Besides the belief in universal humanism, Anderson identifies two other general features of cosmopolitanism: "reflective distance from one's cultural affiliations [and] a broad understanding of other cultures and customs", though the relative weight which intellectual traditions of cosmopolitanism have historically assigned these features varies, as do the forms of distance and cultural identities against which cosmopolitanisms are defined. Cosmopolitanisms therefore vary

[21] "Far from being 'detached' free-floating citizens of the world, today's cosmopolitans are 'rooted' in agendas where national and global forces intersect, in a mutating *cosmopolitical* field of economic, social, and political forces" (Bharucha 2006: 115).

[22] Cf. Nussbaum's reappraisal of classical cosmopolitanism and world citizenship, published initially in a separate issue of *Boston Review* (October/November 1994) along with the hard-hitting responses from twenty-nine scholars, to appear in a substantially reduced and edited format in Cohen ed. 1996. The reluctance of the large majority of responses to accept the old cosmopolitan ideal of world citizenship over and above patriotic and local allegiances, or consider appeals to humanity as too vapid to generate any serious moral action, while still advancing the need for cosmopolitan consciousness, goes to show that cosmopolitanism has largely been redefined away from purely negative detachment which pits it irreconcilably against both patriotism and nationalism. It also demonstrates the pervasively embattled rubric of cosmopolitanism that resists any one single definition. Cf. Cohen ed. 1996, particularly responses by Appiah, Bok, Butler and Falk, pp. 21-9; 38-44; 45-52 and 53-60 respectively. Cf. also Brennan 1997: 24-7; Pollock 2000: 602. For more targeted responses to Nussbaum's reading of Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*, cf. Bharucha 2006: n6 204; S. Tagore 2008.

substantially from being exclusionary to being expansively inclusionary models (*Ibid.*: 272-3). It is important to evoke here Sheldon Pollock's comparative analysis of ancient European and South-Asian cosmopolitanisms, which demonstrates that unlike the Roman exclusionary model which presupposes a "polity" for its "cosmos", Sanskritic universals and cosmopolitan tradition do not have a notion of common polity to it (see Pollock 2000). Neither universalism nor cosmopolitanism need be viewed from within the Western paradigm of the nation-state, as Tagore's own example will powerfully demonstrate.

The inclusive model that Pollock celebrates is also made compatible with a new cosmopolitan consciousness in which the either/or perspective is superseded by a both/and approach. Universalism is thus contextualized and the various dichotomies (nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism, relativism vs. universalism) are brought to bear as correctives on each other (Beck 2004). Cosmopolitanism is qualified as *realistic* (Ulrich Beck), or *rooted* (Kwame Appiah) or *vernacular* (Homi Bhabha, Sheldon Pollock) in order to combine group- or community-committed loyalties with values of toleration and openness to cultural difference.

Where the strain of nationalist thought discussed in the first half of the chapter converges with universalism is in the point where nationalism is transcended, but not in the sense of negating a particular identity, but in the sense of modifying it, enriching it, laying it open to multiple interactions. If Fanon was right in saying that the fight for a national existence is a founding moment which sets "culture moving and opens to it the doors of creation", he was also right in stressing that "a people is not simply a dominated people" (1963: 244; 150). A notion of universality/universalism that I have traced in this chapter is therefore an open-ended and above all creative a concept. As such it runs counter to oppressive constructions of sameness or prescriptive norms for humanity at large that inform imperialist and oppressive agendas. It is with such a notion in mind that I wish to approach Tagore's and Kosovel's articulations of "universalism" and their projects of cultural liberation as I situate them within their respective histories.

PART II

সোনার তরী

গগনে গরজে মেঘ, ঘন বরষা।
কূলে একা বসে আছি, নাহি ভরসা।
রাশি রাশি ভারা ভারা ধান-কাটা হল সারা,
ভরা নদী ক্ষুরধারা খরপরশা—
কাটিতে কাটিতে ধান এল বরষা॥

একখানি ছোটো খেত, আমি একেলা—
চারি দিকে বাঁকা জল করিছে খেলা।
পরপারে দেখি আঁকা তরুছায়ামসী-মাখা
গ্রামখানি মেঘে ঢাকা প্রভাতবেলা।
এ পারেতে ছোটো খেত, আমি একেলা॥

গান গেয়ে তরী বেয়ে কে আসে পারে!
দেখে যেন মনে হয়, চিনি উহারে।
ভরা পালে চলে যায়, কোনো দিকে নাহি চায়,
ঢেউগুলি নিরুপায় ভাঙে দু ধারে—

First three stanzas of Tagore's poem "Sonar tari"

2. RABINDRANATH TAGORE: FROM *SWADESHI* TO A *VISHVAKABI*

> I remember the time when the word 'national' first came to be propagated in Bengal. I awoke one morning to find on all sides national paper, national fair, national song, national theatre. Everything was in the shadow of a national fog.
>
> (Tagore, in Das Gupta 1991: 128)

Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861, four years after the British crown had taken over the administration of India from the East India Company, and died in 1941, six years before India gained political independence from British rule. His entire life was lived under colonial rule, and yet throughout he would reiterate with undiminished conviction that there was one "great fact" about his age, and that was "the meeting of human races" (2002b: 76). The arrival of the British was for Tagore "a human fact" (2002c: 104), and the ownership of the subcontinent an open, even possibly, an irrelevant, question.

How do we understand such a positioning against the more depressing historical fact of India's colonization? Do we take it as symptomatic of what Bengal's first novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee saw as a distinctive trait of Indian psyche, their indifference to the question of rulership and lack of desire for liberty? Was not that, as Bankim argued, the root cause of their subjugation (cf. Chattterjee 1993: 54-5)? Does it reveal a betrayal, or a lack, of nationalist consciousness or is it rather, as I intend to argue, a radical critique of and an alternative to it?

In this chapter I will extract a line of thought in Tagore's (evolving) response to the British presence in India that is a *double* critique of both imperialist culture and its anti-colonial nationalist derivation, but without surrendering an anti-colonial intellectual position. Tagore gave his anti-colonialism a broader base, envisioning it as a larger search for liberation (Said 1994: 265). I start by looking at some personal and historical factors that helped shape Tagore's theory and practice of liberation. One of the first things to realize about Tagore's universalism is, as critics have rightly argued, that it is neither "placeless" nor "vague" (Hogan 2003: 11; cf. S. Tagore 2006: 21). Though the discussion of the mode of Tagore's universalism is reserved more strictly for the next chapter, given the intertwined nature of the

concepts at hand there will be some inevitable thematic overlap in this and the following chapter.

It would be impossible to attempt anything like a comprehensive account of eighty years of Tagore's life with reference to his numerous achievements against the turbulent history of his times. All I can do here is draw attention to the larger culturo-historical and family background (and the various currents and cross-currents of response to the British), as I retain my focus on (a) Tagore's emerging out of his boyhood seclusion as a relevant public (nationalist) voice, and (b) his subsequent withdrawal from the political arena, disillusioned as he became with the ideology and politics of nationalism. This will prepare the ground for the chapters that follow, which take up Tagore's international career as a *visvakabi* ("world" poet) in the post-Nobel Prize years.

The changing times

The nineteenth century was a time of unprecedented social change as Indian society had to negotiate western influences under the tremendous pressures of evolving colonial machinery. The English-educated urban Hindu middle class, to which Tagore belonged, engaged eagerly with diverse materials made available through British Orientalism, the spread of English education, and the advent of print culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, and in the process, they came to articulate not only a new religious, historical and national consciousness, but also produce new science, literature and art.[1]

The seismic shifts notwithstanding, the more recent and finely tuned historical perspectives have assessed the nature of this change in terms of both novelty *and* continuity of Indian culture under the colonial rule (Bose and Jalal 2003: 77). Paying more attention to Indian initiative, agency and creative response – on how imported ideas were reshaped in indigenous setting and given a new distinct sensibility and purpose – the newer narratives of India's impact with the West stress how a new indigenous culture evolved out of the inherited tradition, and are interested in exploring the nature of that change (Ray 2001: 63).

The 1820s and 1830s are seen as the period which started the so-called "Bengal Renaissance" and saw major achievements in the fields of the arts, literature, as well as social and religious reform (Bose and Jalal 2003: 84). In spite of

[1] For seminal work on British Orientalism, cf. Kopf 1969.

the many attempts to disqualify "the Indian Awakening", to refer to the phenomenon by its other name, its response to the problem of alien cultural imposition by way of figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) in the first half of the nineteenth century and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in the latter remains a highly creative one.[2]

Of the many early responses to western education and culture that were first to reach the city of Calcutta, the commercial and political centre of the British rule in the subcontinent, Bose and Jalal identify three broad strands. The first is encapsulated by the Young Bengal group under the tutelage of Henry Derozio at the Hindu College (the first English language higher education institution, established in 1818, largely through Indian initiative), who were most enthusiastic takers of the new ideas from the West, and flaunted their newly-acquired tastes through Western dress and eating habits. At the same time they derided Indian ways. Opposing them was the Dharma Sabha, a society whose "conservative reaction" stoutly opposed colonial interference, launching, for example, a campaign against the outlawing of sati (ritual suicide by widows).[3] This kind of revalorization of "tradition" must indeed be seen properly in its context as a reaction against the oppressive colonial regime.[4] But the "most creative strand", Bose and Jalal maintain, "was led by Rammohun Roy, who attempted to adapt elements from all that he considered best in Indian and Western learning" (2003: 81).

For Tagore, as well as for other key figures of the Bengal Renaissance, western-derived rational thinking stimulated questioning of every aspect of life as they knew it and brought forth unprecedented concerns for human welfare, human rights and justice. Addressing the abuses of Indian society, a number of men set out with the aim to reform time-honoured social practices, of which the caste system was

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[2] The very idea of the Bengal Renaissance has presented a fierce bone of contention among scholars, ever since it was met with a radical Leftist critique in the 1970s and 80s. Was it a renaissance, how, if at all, does it compare with Italian Renaissance, what was its significance in the social, religious and political spheres, and so on? However dissenting the responses are, there is core agreement that the designated phenomenon was characterized by unprecedented intellectual activity across various disciplines, ranging from literature to science. For more on the debate, cf. Raychaudhuri: 2002; Ray 2001: 6-9, 29-66; Das Gupta 2003; Sarkar 2005.

[3] To present these trends in terms of strict opposition between westernization and traditionalism is of course simplifying the complexities of most these responses. For example, Rosinka Chaudhuri has convincingly linked a body of early nineteenth century poetry written by Indians *in English* to the very beginnings of the formation of a national consciousness in India, thereby going against the later-day nationalist assumptions. The first to articulate Indian nationalist conscience in a sonnet form in English was the Calcutta-born teacher of Anglo-Portuguese origin, Louis Vivian Derozio, in his poem "To India, My Native Land". Cf. Chaudhuri 2002.

[4] See, for example, Nandy's essay 'Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest', in 2005 :1-31.

one. Rammohun Roy, appealing to reason, but also seeking sanction in religious books, perhaps in part to satisfy his own religious needs and in part to silence his critics, raised a vigorous protest against the practice of sati, and played a key role in the practice being outlawed in 1829. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar led a campaign for legalising widow remarriage in the 1850s. Child marriage, education for women, agrarian reforms, these and other issues all came up for heated debate, as the various reformers made efforts to distinguish convention from tradition. Tagore writes:

> Revolutionary changes have come into our thoughts and attitudes. This is evident in the proposition that those whom social usage has decreed to be untouchables should be given the right to enter temples (1961l: 344).

It is impossible within the scope of this thesis to discuss the number of different causes that were being championed, or debate the question of the implementation of these in social reality, a complex topic in its own right.[5] This is only to show that Tagore was not without his predecessors and that the early nineteenth-century history of the colonial encounter provided an important backdrop for his own social concerns half a century later, as the "old" India had already entered the high noon of Empire, and the relations between the British and the Indians became far more strained.

For indeed around the time of Tagore's birth, the atmosphere surrounding the relations between the British and the Indians had tensed considerably. The first major rising against the ~~Indian~~ British rule, the Sepoy Revolt of 1857, was crushed and the traditional ruling classes were more or less destroyed. The government of India came under the direct control of the British crown (Poddar 2004: 3-5). The subsequent changes in the British policies on India and administrative measures taken "disrupted the inter-racial relationships, led to the import of brides for the British population, to the psychological fear of the native and resulted in harsh exclusionary policies" (Jain 2006: 24). Anti-British sentiments among the Indian population were on the rise.

But before we plot the trajectory of Tagore's involvement with the anti-colonial nationalist movement, a few more words need saying about his family background, since the Tagores took an active part in all aspects of social change that revolutionized nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, providing major stimulus to the

[5] For more, cf. Sarkar 1970.

young Rabindranath. Born as the fourteenth, effectively the youngest, child into "a cultural hothouse" that nurtured arts and sciences, music and dance, philosophy and religion, whose many members in themselves became distinguished writers, musicians, painters, Tagore's many talents were also encouraged to flourish (Dyson 2003: 23).

Rabindranath was fond of the river metaphor to capture the changing times that were both a break with and a continuation of India's cultural and religious traditions. "My ancestors came floating to Calcutta upon the earliest tide of the fluctuating fortune of the East India Company", thus describing his forefathers, who had settled in Gobindapur, one of the three fishing villages that later became the city of Calcutta back in the early seventeenth century (1961k: 289).[6] Building on the river metaphor, he also wrote: "My family had broken from the mainstream well before I was born" (2006: 77-8). He must have been referring the occasion a long time back when two ancestors, the Brahmin brothers Kamadev and Jayadev, lost their caste, from having smelt Muslim food – or so the legend goes (Kripalani 2001: 2). Thus outside the dominant fold of orthodox Hindu society even before the arrival of the British, the Tagores were in a better position to experiment with new ideas. "Thanks to our seclusion, my family enjoyed a certain freedom," Rabindranath acknowledged, noting also that this freedom found direct expression in their family dialect, which the Calcuttans referred to as "Thakurbari-r bhasha" (Tagore's household language) (in Das Gupta 2006: 8). This was an important foundation for the poet's art of transforming a language for his own self-expression, as was the family's insistence on using Bengali on all occasions and not yield to the trend of adopting English. We can evoke Tagore's son's account to get a sense of where the Tagores got their restless and independent spirit:

> Not only were the ancestors of the Tagores wanderers in the province of Bengal moving from one place to another and never settling down, but latterly they were looked upon as outcasts. They had to depend upon their own resources and struggle to win any sort of position in society. They soon found that his could be done only by accumulation of wealth. These two factors probably helped to develop the pioneering spirit and the freedom of mind that could rise above all social and religious conventions

[6] It was a man called Panchanan Kushari who joined the leading traders of the time in supplying provisions to foreign ships sailing up the river Ganges, and thus laid the foundation stone in the family's thereafter continuing lucrative associations with the British. It was then too that the name Tagore first came into being. Since the family were Brahmins, the low-caste local population would address them with the respective term "Thakur" (Sir), taken by foreign merchants to be their family name. Once "Thakur" was anglicized it became Tagore (cf. Kripalani 1980: 1-4).

> which are the basic characteristics of the Tagore family (Rathindranath Tagore 2003: 3).

This move away from the orthodox Brahminical lifestyle towards entrepreneurship was enacted by Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore (1794 - 1846), under whom the family fortune was made through acquiring large agricultural estates in Bengal and Orissa. He was India's first industrialist, an astute businessman but also a lavish entertainer of his European friends (for which he earned himself the title "Prince"). A close friend of Rammohun Roy, he stood on the side of social reform and unorthodoxy. He generously supported public charities, and many cultural and educational institutions, such as the Hindu College (later Presidency College), the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the National Library of Calcutta owe something to Dwarkanath's assistance. In defiance of Hindu strictures that forbade sea travel, Dwarkanath journeyed to Europe twice, met Queen Victoria in England and Max Müller in Paris, and like Rammohun Roy some years before him in Bristol, he died in London away from India, a decade before the Revolt (Kripalani 2001: 4-8).

Tagore certainly framed the family's heterodox status in positive terms of freedom to build their own world with their own thoughts and "energy of mind" (2002e: 8). Significantly too, he saw the family's "code of life" as being "composed of three cultures, Hindu, Muslim and British", a point he then translated into a plural, inclusive and essentially open conceptualization of India (1961j: 29). And, staying faithful to his riverine idiom, he spoke of "the currents of three movements" meeting "in the life of our country" at the time of his birth, identifying them in turn as religious, initiated by Rammohan Roy and later revived by his father Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905); literary, with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) as the pioneer in modernizing Bengali literary idiom; and (c) national.

Before we devote the rest of the chapter to the national question, we need to understand some of the complexities pertaining to both the literary and religious currents of the nineteenth century and early-twentieth century colonial Bengal, so as to underline the hybrid formations that emerged through the colonial encounter, giving rise to "the almost permanently interstitital Bengali middle-class culture" (Chaudhuri 2008: 84), against which Tagore's own struggle to position himself between "the nation" and "the world" took place.[7] Since there is considerable cross-

[7] In 'The Flute of Modernity: Tagore and the Middle Class', Chaudhuri explains that Bengal was the site of India's first middle-class culture, which was neither feudal nor entrepreneurial. Its barristers,

over between the religious and national movements, or more precisely, "a confluence of Hindu cultural nationalist ideas with those of Indian nationalism" (Bhatt 2001: 23), for the sake of coherence, I will first look at the linguistic and literary map of Tagore's Bengal.

Languages lost and found

The linguistic map of the nineteenth century colonial Bengal was far from straightforward, as a new linguistic and literary reality was rapidly being negotiated under the institutional pressures of colonial rule. There were several languages in close competition and interaction with each other as well as their distinct social functions.[8] Sudipta Kaviraj describes the early-nineteenth-century structure of linguistic practice of educated Bengalis thus:

> An ordinary Bengali householder would speak to his family and friends and in the bazaar in one of the local Bangla dialects [...] But dealing with political authority, for instance regarding landholding or revenue, called for the consistent and skilful use of Persian. Religious ceremonies – a constant part of the householder routine – involved the mandatory use of Sanskrit [...] Any transaction with colonial power required knowledge of English (2003: 538).

Being situated between these various languages and their respective "high" and "low" social functions was a part of Tagore's own background, though by the time he began his writing career, the linguistic picture had long been simplified with English taking over the administrative function of Persian.[9] Sanskrit remained "the high language of the Hindu society's 'internal' practices, such as worship, marriage and literary cultivation" and English entrenched itself as "the language of a new kind of external practice, immediately associated with modern forms of power: law, administration, and new opportunities for external trade". Wedged between the two spheres of intellectual influence, and crucially prompted by new and rising nationalist tendencies, Bengali – or Bangla – of the nineteenth century began

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advocates, schoolteachers, lecturers, doctors, civil servants were the first indigenous governing class "who experienced power while being cut off from its source" (2008: 81-2).

[8]To understand how language in pre-colonial India was part of a flexible ideology of occasion and identity, as opposed to a bounded entity located in dictionaries, grammar books, literary cannons as well as on a map and linked with a distinct "community" of people, cf. Levyeld 1993: 201-2.

[9] After Thomas B. Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835), English replaced Persian as the official language of the government and the higher courts, but Bengali and Urdu continued to be important at the lower levels of the administration across eastern and northern India (Bose and Jalal 2003: 84).

selectively negotiating both Sanskrit and English to eventually emerge as "an entirely new kind of high Bangla" (*Ibid.*: 533).

The challenge was to establish a language capable of performing the functions previously reserved for Sanskrit and English and thus stretch the linguistic parameters to encompass both "the high recitative solemnity of Sanskrit" and "sufficient complexity and subtlety to become a language of law and science". More to our point, however, it meant also acquiring "the capacity to produce a high literature" seen as "a decisive mark of modernity" (*Ibid.*: 542). In an extraordinarily short period of experimentation, literary Bangla went from Vidyasagar's proto-nationalist project of Sanskritizing the language, through Bankimchandra's "defence of the use of a mixed language for literature" allowing it to draw on the various resources of colloquial speech even if Sanskritic vocabulary was still dominant, to Tagore's "fully developed and highly complex language" freed of "unpractical classicism" (*Ibid.*: 544-5).

If this, in short, was modern Bangla's evolving relationship with Sanskrit, the other decisive input, far more contradictory, since belonging to an alien civilization and brought over under the banner of colonialism, came from English. In a fascinating section "Science and Syntax", Kaviraj shows how English syntactic forms and expressions related to the scientific world-view had penetrated the Bengali language and were naturalized with astonishing rapidity, effecting a radical break with traditional syntax (*Ibid.*: 546-7). The point to be made here is that the making of modern Bangla literary language and culture involved complex transactions with two different literary worlds, one drawn from Indian traditions, the other from the West. This was an unprecedented case of different authors improvising – in line with their convictions, sensibilities and agendas – "by using elements from both aesthetic alphabets and producing new forms that were irreducible to either". And what emerged was not, as is still sometimes assumed, an (imperfect) imitation of Western forms but "a distinctively Indian/Bangla species of the literary modern" powerfully exemplified in Tagore's own works (*Ibid.*: 558). Krishna Kripalani noted that Tagore's creative response to the impulse of his age yielded a poetry in which "the *Upanishads* and Kalidasa, Vaishnava lyricism, and the rustic vigour of the folk idiom, are so well blended with Western influences [...] that generations of critics will continue to wrangle over his specific debt to each of them" (2007: 282). (As we shall see, Kosovel too responded to a variety of literary models and inspirations

available to him in a creative way, taking his language forward in new sensibilities and formal innovations, presenting somewhat of a similar problem to his critics.)[10]

Bearing in mind these literary and linguistic transactions, we can understand what Amit Chaudhuri means when he writes that "the nineteenth century in India, and especially Bengal, was a time of radical crossings-over in language, when languages were in the process of being both lost and regained" (2008: 73). In the context of ~~post~~ colonial South Asia, bi- or multilingualism was not simply the case of having command over more than one language but of having more than one language inscribed into the very language of choice for creative expression, which in Tagore's case remained Bengali. In that sense, as Chaudhuri rightly points out, common assumptions that link hybridity with post-colonial uses of English and delegate vernacular languages of the erstwhile colonized countries to a sphere of some sort of authenticity are grossly oversimplified (*Ibid.*: 79).

If Persian was lost as the language of law and power and superseded by English (with all the ramifications that this entailed), it was with the adoption of English that the Bengali intelligentsia got the idea of writing in their "mother-tongue", thus laying the foundations for modern Bangla literature and the literary efflorescence that ensued. It is important for us to understand not just the hybrid, indeed, cosmopolitan context of Bengal Renaissance itself, and Tagore's place in it, but also of the hybrid context in which modern Bengali language and literary culture emerged.

Furthermore, the new vernacular culture that Tagore envisioned was intended to be cosmopolitan, not parochial, and this is reflected as much in his refashioning of Bengali as it is in his endorsement of English (to be discussed further in the next chapter). Of course, this is not to suggest that parochial and cosmopolitan in relation to the vernacular fall neatly on the side of pre- and post-Tagore era (or for that matter pre- and post-colonization age), any more than they are to be seen as totalizing forces of any culture at any time. Such absolutizing would be historically quite untenable. Cosmopolitanism had better be seen as one of many tendencies existing within a given culture, or, more precisely, to borrow from Sheldon Pollock, "a mode of literary (and intellectual, and political) communication" that stimulates a feeling beyond one's immediate environment (2000: 539). Certainly

[10] Discussion of concrete texts to demonstrate the twin or multiple dynamics in relation to internal and external literary traditions is reserved for Kosovel. For more on how Tagore drew on narratives and characters from the Sanskrit high classical tradition but handled the subject matter in experimental modern ways, see, amongst others, Kaviraj 2003: 558-9; Chaudhuri 2008: 79.

cosmopolitanism was not newly discovered either by Tagore or the modern Bengali intelligentsia; they were merely "rearranging and redirecting a much older tradition of linguistic and cultural versatility" (Kaviraj 2003: 531).

One could also argue that this relocation was at once an expansion (through appropriations of Western-derived forms) and a narrowing from the twin sources of Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian cosmopolitan literary spheres to a more exclusively Sanskrit-based orientation. Kaviraj points out how in the latter part of the nineteenth century the Bengali literary high culture whose history was once rooted in "lively transactions" between the Hindu and Islamic literary traditions, transformed under the Western impact "to become a more solidly Hindu sphere" (*Ibid.*: 531).

Reform or revival?

Of the three currents that Tagore identified as the shaping forces of his time and place, it now remains for us to consider the last two – intermingling – currents of religion and nationalism. We can also pick up the narrative of his family background from where we left off, namely the death of Tagore's worldly grandfather Prince Dwarkanath and move on to consider the his eldest son Debendranath, Tagore's father.

Debendranath, very different in temperament to Dwarkanath, was brought up in luxury as a child, but turned against a lifestyle of riches after an intense spiritual experience at the side of his dying grandmother. He took to the Upanishads – eventually passing on this love to Rabindranath, who daily recited its verses as a young boy and drew on their wisdom throughout his adult life – and was led to revive the reformed Hindu society started by Rammohun Roy two decades earlier, turning it into a movement "dedicated to the worship of a universal and formless Divinity that informs all life and being, in accordance with the teaching of the Upanishads" (Kripalani 2001: 7). The Brahmo Samaj, as it was renamed, continued Roy's opposition to idol worship and the caste system of the Hindu orthodoxy, though Debendranath was a religious rather than a social reformer. The reformist spiritualism of the movement, or Brahmo universalism (David Kopf), owed something to Protestant Christianity as it sought a return to the original philosophical "monotheism" of the Vedas and the Upanishads.[11]

[11] For more on how Hindu (Vedanta) religious modernity became the first vehicle of ideological modernity in India as well as the parallels between the Christian Reformation and the nineteenth-

The Brahmo Samaj became "the most palpable institution through which both the religious and social impact of the West was mediated in Bengal" (Mukherjee 2001: xii), and as such its significance in shaping the Bengali middle-class – or *bhadralok* (lit. genteel folk) – culture, cannot be overestimated. In fact, Amit Chaudhuri, in line with David Kopf's seminal study of the movement, understands it as "the most powerful intellectual movements to shape modern, secular India". This is because:

> In place of a varied, polyphonic, amorphous heterogeneity [of the Hindu gods and goddesses], there was now a unifying, all-encompassing meaning that was capable of accommodating and subsuming what it had replaced; and if this was Brahmo Samaj's reworking of the Hindu religion, it was also Nehru's concept of what India as a nation-state should be (2008: 76).

Certainly, the unity in diversity paradigm that emerges from this reworking of Hinduism exacted a strong hold on Tagore's own socio-political imagination, though Tagore found himself ill at ease with the factionalism of the movement or its sectarian community, but did, as Kopf argues, always return to the universalist philosophical Brahmoism with its bent on reform (1988a: 297).[12] In fact as a Brahmo, Tagore was somewhat of a square peg in a round hole, having stopped school at thirteen and having never pursued the Brahmo professional line of Calcutta intelligentsia ostensibly cut off from the masses (*Ibid.*: 292-3). Moreover, the 1866 schism in the movement – Tagore was only five then – between the larger tradition of Brahmo universalism with its reformist propensities advocated, in a radical way, by Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884), who enacted the split, and the Adi ("original) Brahmo Samaj's more nationalist leanings and loyalty to their own culture led by Tagore's father's branch, can be seen as reflected in Tagore's own struggle, at various periods in his life, to position himself between the two modernizing alternatives of nationalism and universalism.[13] This struggle is fictionalized in the novel *Gora*, (serialized between 1907-09; published in book form in 1910, but set in

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century Indian intelligentsia's rediscovery and reinterpretation of Vedanta, cf. Van Biljert 2003 and 2009.

[12] Amartya Sen identifies the focus on unity in diversity as the core element of what he calls classical nationalist model of Indian anticolonial thought, expressed, most influentially, by Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*. Cf. Sen 1996:13-20.

[13] Against Sen's zeal for Christianity, Debendranath's group argued for the authority of Hinduism. The various disputes allegedly led to exclusivist conceptions of "Hindu nationalism", where Hinduism was seen as the basis of national unity in India. For more on the arguments about Hinduism in relation to Christianity and the controversy about whether Hinduism has the resources for universal ethics or not, cf.Bhatt 2001: 23-26.

1870s), in which the eponymous hero undergoes a change from an aggressive Hindu nationalist (portrayed with sympathy unlike his latter-day counterpart, Sandip, in *The Home and the World* [*Ghaire-Baire*]) to an individual freed of abstract sectarian identifications and ready to subject reality to close critical scrutiny, against which an idealised tradition or imagined community could not bear up.

Within the framework of cultural nationalism evoked by Kopf and located within Adi Brahmoism, we can more readily appreciate why Tagore's father, unlike his own father, never travelled to the West (but travelled extensively in India); why he refused to read letters if they were written in English, and preferred to keep the British and Europeans at bay; why his orientation was almost exclusively towards raising Bengalis' awareness of their own cultural heritage, and so on (Radhakrishnan and Roychowdhury 2003: 30).

As nationalist fervour was gaining momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the search for a distinctive Indian identity found an outlet in the so-called "swadeshi" (literally "of our own country") enterprises. Under Debendranath, the young Tagores stood firm on the question of language in the face of the rising trend of adopting English by the English-educated middle class: Bengali was to be used and cultivated in all affairs of social and personal contact.[14] In his autobiography, *My Reminiscences* (*Jibansmriti*), Tagore lauded this fact, and as an educator, he invariably championed Bengali as the primary language of education on the grounds of it being the natural vehicle capable of engaging the child's whole mind and experiential world. The foundation of education must be in the mastery of one's mother tongue, both as a vehicle of creative thought and as a tool of precise (scientific) reasoning (Tagore 2003b: 71-2).[15] In the realm of politics also, Tagore insisted that the language used at Provincial Conferences (annual political meetings) should be that of the province and not English, as was the common practice. He was concerned about the communication gap between the English-educated leaders and their public, wanting to broaden out participation (Poddar 2004: 50-1).

In his autobiography Tagore writes how his brothers had been awakened to a pronounced nationalism in dress, literature and music, leading the way in writing patriotic poems and songs (2003b: 169-70). Beside such cultural nationalism, the

[14] Parimal Ghosh identifies this as one aspect of the more general bhadralok cultural position: "[...] true culture and enlightenment could not be attained through the neglect of one's native language or through aping" (2008: 274).

[15] Cf. Tagore 1961, his first essay on education, where he sets forth a plea for accepting Bengali as a medium of instruction in schools at all stages of education, from primary to university level.

Tagores also participated in the economic swadeshi, which advocated self-help and self-reliance or *atmashakti*. On the positive side it fostered the production and consumption of indigenous goods and on the negative it led to the boycott of British products and services. Long before the swadeshi cry was raised throughout the province as a summons to boycott the British goods and schools, or, for that matter, even before the national movement gained a political platform in the National Congress (founded in 1885), the Tagores promoted swadeshi enterprises. As early as 1867, the Hindu Mela, a "political-cum-cultural festival" was founded by a Brahmo nationalist to bring the attention of the urban *bhadrolok* to the indigenous rather than imported products and bolster national pride. The Mela became an annual event with the support and involvement of the Tagores (Radhakrishnan and Roychowdhury 2003: 30).

Tagore's elder brother, Jyotirindranath, seems to have been the most reckless and romantic in his schemes to defy foreign rule. Within the Mela, he set up a secret society on the model of the Carbonari, the secret revolutionary groups of the early years of Italian Risorgimento, of which a thirteen-year-old Rabindranath became a member. With the chanting of Vedic hymns, the discussions conducted in whispers and the secret manufacture of matchsticks, the society provided more of a romantic release than a consequential political force to resist foreign rule. It was short-lived, not unlike another one of Jyotirindranath's daring schemes in which he established, and for a while ran, a steamer line in competition with the British companies – a venture which floundered badly and brought him close to bankruptcy (Poddar 2004: 8 -12).

With this we begin to appreciate the kind of stimulus and emotionalism Rabindranath was exposed to in his youth as he himself was beginning to emerge in public as a relevant national voice. Aged fifteen, he delivered a fiery anti-British poem at the tenth anniversary of the Hindu Mela and publicly denounced the British Raj for consigning India to a deplorable state of degradation. His gesture coincided with a Durbar held in Delhi in the honour of Queen Victoria, who was just declared "The Empress of India" (1 January 1877). The country on the other hand was being ravaged by a famine (Radhakrishnan and Roychowdhury 2003: 30-1).

Two decades later, in 1896, he inaugurated the singing of *Bande Mataram* ("Hail to the Motherland") at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress. In this poem, written by Bankimchandra Chatterji for his novel *Anandamath* (1882), India is likened to the Hindu goddess Durga, and its slogan became the rallying cry

of the nationalists during the Swadeshi movement.[16] The first half of Tagore's life certainly disproves the predominant image of the poet as someone high above politics, even in the narrow sense. And it was in the Swadeshi movement proper, as it reached its highpoint around 1905-6, that Rabindranath threw himself wholeheartedly into politics.

Swadeshi movement

In the following pages, I will, in the main, draw on Sumit Sarkar's commanding study of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal between 1903-1908, the value of which lies in its detailed relating of Tagore's disillusionment and rejection of nationalism in response to the movement's diverse and stormy developments.

The Swadeshi movement was sparked off by the proposed partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon into an eastern and western part. The official argument was administrative – the province of Bengal was too large to be efficiently run – and though there were genuine administrative considerations, a major factor was the perceived need to undermine growing nationalism in Bengal (Bengali intelligentsia were the most articulate political voice at the time) through the policy of divide-and-rule. While at Dacca, Lord Curzon planted the seed of separatism by evoking a Muslim-dominated separate province and the unity this would grant the Muslim population (Sarkar 1973: 9-18). When the partition was formally announced in July 1905, this drew a cry of protest from the politically-conscious, Hindus and Muslims alike.[17] Tagore became deeply involved. His son Rathindranath writes:

> Father took an effective part in the agitation that followed the partition of Bengal. It almost appeared as if one day he emerged out of his seclusion to become overnight the high priest of Indian nationalism. In songs and poems and in trenchant addresses on the public platforms he bitterly attacked Curzon's policy of divide and rule (2003: 61).

It was clear that the ideologues of the partition had overlooked also the sense of unity that had come to exist among the Bengalis. On the one hand there were the growing

[16] Eventually Tagore came to dispute the appropriateness of this song for the National Congress because of its strong Hindu bias that would alienate the Muslims and prevent fostering a sense of unity between all communities in India. In a letter to Subhas Chandra Bose in 1937, he wrote: "The novel *Anandamath* is a work of literature, and so the song is appropriate in it. But Parliament is a place of union for all religious groups, and there the song cannot be appropriate" (in Dutta and Robinsons eds. 2005: 487).

[17] On Muslim swadeshi leaders and Hindu-Muslim relations, cf. Sarkar 1973: 79-82.

economic disaffections (aggravated by repeated famines and epidemics in the 1890s), and the particularistic interests of the landed gentry and English-educated Hindu intelligentsia, which fuelled the fires of the anti-partition movement, but on the other there was the existence of "something like a common culture" (the in-bred social hierarchies and regional differences notwithstanding) sustained by literary and folk traditions that made protesters instinctively react against the imperialist tactics to drive a wedge between a people who shared the same language (Sarkar 1973: 22-5 [22-3]). It was also this common culture (a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and folk elements) that provided Tagore with a major source of inspiration for his own vision of India. The rich Bhakti tradition, the Baul songs and medieval Vaishnava poetry, with their emphasis on the oneness of human experience that cuts across caste and religion, were all cultural landmarks for Tagore enabling him to reinterpret India's past and envision its future in a particular way (cf. Tagore 2002).

The movement itself consisted largely of upper-caste Hindus, many of whom were, like Tagore's family, zamindars with vested interests in the land worked by lower-caste Hindus and Muslims.[18] It must be understood that Bengali bhadralok were the first enthusiastic takers of English education, securing for themselves a privileged position, at least initially, throughout upper India. A new mood of confidence was in the air, derived also from a sense of pride in India's heritage as well as contemporary achievements in arts and sciences, not to mention events abroad, particularly the unexpected Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, which "blew up the myth of European superiority" (Sarkar 1973: 27-8).[19]

The famous opening lines of the Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin's *The Ideals of the East* (1902) that "Asia is one" – the manuscript was completed during his stay at the Tagore's family mansion Jorasanko – were also a timely evocation of pan-Asian solidarity vis-à-vis the West. [20] With the influence of Sister Nivedita, the Irish devotee of Swami Vivekananda, who took up the cause of India's freedom, confidence in the potential of their own civilization was rising. All in all, as Sarkar writes: "by 1905 the sense of identity was strong enough for partition to provoke widespread anger and lead to a genuine patriotic outburst" (*Ibid.*: 23).

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[18] See Poddar's analysis of Tagore's anti-imperialist stance from the perspective of the interests of the propertied class dependant on the colonial system. Though a rigorous and important analysis, Poddar's perspective does at times feel overdetermined by the class perspective.

[19] "On the day the Treaty was signed", writes Rathindranath, "we lit a big bonfire in the middle of our football field and sang songs all night long to celebrate the awakening of Asia" (2003: 58).

[20] For more on Tagore and Okakura and their ideas on Asia, cf. Bharucha 2006.

For a period of three months, Tagore was practically in the forefront of political agitation, composing patriotic songs – his most enduring contribution to the movement, and which is said to be free of jingoism or incitation to hatred or violence (Poddar 2004: 98) – delivering lectures, publishing articles, as well as, at one point, heading a huge procession through the streets of Calcutta, singing "Let the lives and hearts of sons / And daughters of my country / Be one" (in R. Tagore 2003: 61). When the boycott of British goods was announced, Tagore read an article titled "*Abastha o byabastha*" (lit. "the situation and the remedy") in which it is clear he supported the strategy, though for him it was not a move intended to "harm the English", but a means for his countrymen and women to strengthen themselves and through sacrifice come closer to one another (from an abstract quoted in Poddar 2004: 95). In this paper Tagore also suggested the setting up of a parallel government (Ghosh 2005: 8). It is therefore not true to maintain, as critics have often done in outlining Tagore's political thought, that he was against the boycott and non-cooperation from the start.[21] It would be truer to say that his position shifted and evolved in response to concrete political developments, and his ideas adjusted accordingly.

If initially Tagore stood more or less united with the founding impetus of the movement that came from strong dissatisfactions with the moderate and abortive politics of the National Congress, the English–educated political elite alienated from the masses, and therefore sought an alternative in a people's movement building on *atmashakti*, he withdrew all his support once patriotic passions – to which he himself had contributed significant fuel with his songs and lectures – took a violent turn. Although he was never to give up his belief in the need to build on self-reliance and autonomous self-development, a belief that in his case predates the movement by at least two decades and becomes the supreme value after it – he was to radically re-evaluate some of the ideas that became linked with the emphasis on *atmashakti* or self-strength/reliance and which, for a short period, were to inform his own thinking.[22] The call for self-reliance and a revival of indigenous institutions became tied up with the use of traditional Hindu symbols. Stoking up religious sentiment was seen as an effective means of bridging the gulf between the educated and the common people and galvanize Bengal into action. The anti-colonial nationalism thus

[21] Cf. Radhakrinshnan and Roychowdhury 2003: 31.

[22] Tagore was on the side of "constructive swadeshi" in the movement, promoting a trend towards self-development. But there were also the political extremists who either resorted to boycott or passive resistance in addition to self-help efforts, or became terrorists (Sarkar 1973: 33).

became distinctively Hindu-oriented, and recourse to a perceived glorious past – a general feature of nationalisms – assumed the form of Hindu revivalism (Sarkar 1973: 48).

Sarkar observes that Tagore's writings between 1901 and 1906 visibly demonstrate a hold of revivalist ideas on the poet's mind, from an attempt to defend some of the time-honoured practices in Hindu society to the glorification of India's past and a romanticization of the traditional village, and sees them in an obvious relationship with the political turmoil of the period (*Ibid.*: 54).[23] It was indeed in this period that Tagore, in defiance of Brahmo reformist precepts, and possibly under the influence of his father, married off his daughters, aged eleven and fourteen in the traditional Hindu way (Kopf 1988: 294).

But once Tagore saw concrete outcomes of the alignment of nationalism with Hindu revivalism, particularly as it pushed the frontiers of moderation and entered the sphere of militancy, he would have nothing more to do with the movement. The Hindu-Muslim riots that broke out in parts of East Bengal in the early months of 1907 made him withdraw from every national committee in one day, shocked as he was that "Muslims were being attacked in the name of *swadeshi*" (Das Gupta 2004: 4). To the consternation of many, he left Calcutta to retreat at Santiniketan for a time of "deep introspection and auto-critique" (Sarkar 2002: 119). For a period of nine months his political voice went quiet, but when he re-entered the public domain, his views marked a decisive break with his earlier swadeshi writings.

In a series of new essays of 1907-8, he put forth a stringent critique of the Hindu social traditions, and urged for the country "where people are doomed to perdition for drinking water from the hands of a neighbour, where one's caste is to be preserved by insulting that of another" to reassess itself and reform its practices ("*Byadhi o pratikar*" [lit. the disease and the cure], in Poddar 2004: 110). Of great disturbance to Tagore became also the communal problem, which he kept addressing throughout the remaining part of his long career. On the one hand he urged Hindus and Muslims alike to overcome their differences by addressing "defects in their own character", believing that external forces cannot by themselves turn Hindus and Muslims against each other, unless internal dissensions are already there. There was also now a strong appeal to a shared human identity, since the riots threw into sharp

[23] The most discussed essay from the point of view of its revivalist undercurrent, already in Tagore's time, is his *Swadeshi samaj*, where *samaj* (commonly translated as "society") is romanticized as the locus of true Indian social polity, and India's future seen to rest in a revival of a truly benevolent Hindu *samaj* (cf. Tagore 1961a). For further insight, cf. Sarkar 1973: 52-7; Bharucha 2006: 55-62.

relief that using religion as an arbiter of an individual's politically viable identity will lead to disunity and incapacitate a truly national movement:

> The fact remains that we live in the same land, sharing common joys and sorrows. We are human beings; our failure to unite is a shame, a sin. We (Hindus and Muslims) are the children of the same motherland. If in full recognition of this God-given compulsion we do not step forward to jointly shoulder the vicissitudes of the land, then fie on our humanity [...] Our sin is England's main strength" (*Ibid.*: 110).

But on the other hand, Tagore had the perspicacity to link Hindu/Muslim dissensions with social and economic issues. He wrote of the disparity between the English-educated Hindu majority and the larger proportion of low-income Muslims, and recognized the need to secure an adequate share of "the posts and prestige of government" also for the Muslims, if concord is to be had and jealousies abated (Tagore 1961b: 105-6). Seeing that colonialism had introduced a new major division into the society, Tagore spoke of the importance to turn to the villages and bridge the gap between the educated and the masses that were being left out of the transformation. This concern was already present in the Hindu Mela, but Tagore was now able to delink it from its religious affiliation and give it a new dimension in his concern for the welfare of everyone, regardless of caste or religion. This involved a profound questioning of a freedom struggle based on swadeshi or top-down Hindu nationalism.

In the novel *The Home and the World* (*Ghare baire*, 1915-16), which is set against the background of the Swadeshi movement, Sandip's usurpatory tactics are counterpoised to Nikhilesh's concerns for the welfare of his disadvantaged Muslim tenants who cannot afford to practice swadeshism. Nikhilesh, no doubt voicing Tagore's own evolved outlook, proclaims: "It is my desire [...] to plant something greater than Swadeshi. I am not after dead logs but living trees – and these will take time to grow" (2005: 130). The question of personal freedom is brought into sharp relief against a nationalism that stifles individuality. "The country does not mean the soil, but the men on it," is the answer given to overzealous youths who have come to demand banishment of foreign goods from the market. "Have you yet wasted so much as a glance on what was happening to them? But now you would dictate what salt they shall eat, what clothes they shall wear. Why should they put up with such tyranny, and why should we let them?" (*Ibid.*: 101).

Once again, Tagore understood how the colonial political economy had created unequal dependencies among the various groups in a plural society and how it was often the economically weak who were more dependent on the colonial system than the privileged. For them to follow a nationalism imposed from the above was not just a curtailment of freedom but an existential impossibility. Again I cite from the novel in continuation of the above quotation:

> You are well off, you need not mind the cost. The poor do not want to stand in your way, but you insist on their submitting to your compulsion. As it is, every moment of theirs is a life-and-death struggle for a bare living; you cannot even imagine the difference a few pice means to them – so little have you in common. You have spent your whole past in a superior compartment, and now you come down to use them as tools for the wreaking of your wreath. I call it cowardly (*Ibid.*: 101-2).

This is a powerful repudiation of "a nationalism" which, as Ashish Nandy writes, "steam-rollers society into making a uniform stand against colonialism, ignoring the unequal sacrifices imposed thereby on the poorer and the weaker" (2005a: 19).

If in his swadeshi writings, Tagore dreamt of a synthesis through Hinduism, he now looked towards the ideal of a broadly-cast humanism, where barriers separating individuals are pulled down and a way for a new kind of relationship is envisioned. "Today I am free", says Gora to the Brahmo Paresh Babu, beginning to rediscover himself in broad universal humanist terms, as the myth of his Hindu identity exploded in the face of his white Irish roots: "Today I am Bharatiya [a true Indian]. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Krishtan. Today all the castes of Bharat are my caste, whatever everybody eats is my food" (Tagore 2001h: 475). If this marks the beginning of a new journey for the individual, the answer Tagore advanced for the society was predicated on constructive work and education, while urging for contact with the masses:

> Come down into the midst of the people of our country, spread out a network of multifarious welfare activities, expand the scope of your work, broaden it in all directions – so that high and low, Hindus and Muslims and Christians, all without exception can come together, mingling heart with heart, effort with effort ("*Path O Patheo*" [lit. ways and means] in Sarkar 2004: 84).

In the post-swadeshi era, Tagore moved on to advocate patient and sustained constructive work in a few villages to the southwest of Santiniketan. "There is not the slightest doubt in my mind", he wrote in 1910, "that, if any enterprise is to succeed in this country, then the best thing is to start it single-handed on a very modest scale and gradually build it up [...] [t]hat is the natural method" (in Das Gupta 1991: 128). Often regarded as a hopeless idealist, Tagore, one might argue, was staunchly realist or even pragmatist in his pursuit of ideals: "I alone cannot take responsibility for the whole of India. But even if two or three villages can be freed from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established" (*Ibid.*). His pleas for constructive work fell largely on deaf ears, regarded as politically inexpedient and a betrayal of his initial enthusiasm for the nationalist movement.

Let us sum up what has been said so far. With the help of Sarkar's chronological assessment of Tagore's prose writings vis-à-vis the turbulent Swadeshi years, it has been possible to appreciate that Tagore's "evolution" was a far more embattled one than readings which put him on a timeless pedestal care to portray. Caught between the contradictory pulls of "modernist" and "traditionalist" ideas – an ideological conflict that runs throughout the nineteenth century[24] – Tagore is seen to return "to a basically antitraditionalist and modernist approach", now underlined by explicitly stated universalism (Sarkar 1973: 52). After his break with the nationalists, his vision of India is no longer tied to a Hindu imaginary or glorification of the past but is projected into the future as "India united on a modern basis transcending all barriers of caste, religion and race" (*Ibid.*: 85). His advocacy of a new India does indeed admit of liberal and secular interpretations, but one should not ignore the more poetic and therefore distinctly Tagorean aspect to his evocation. In this, India is not so much a geographical fact, even less so a political one, but an "Idea" that is "against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others". It stands rather "for the co-operation of all peoples of the world" (letter to C. F. Andrews, 13/01/1921, in Andrews ed. 2002: 110). It is at this point we see Tagore

[24] For the sake of clarity of what Sarkar means by attitudes of "modernism" and "traditionalism": the former suggests "an attitude which broadly speaking demands social reforms, tries to evaluate things and ideas by the criteria of reason and present-day utility, and bases itself on a humanism seeking to transcend limits of caste and religion". The latter, on the other hand, "defends and justifies existing social mores in the name of immemorial tradition and the glorious past, and [...] tends to substitute emotion and faith for reason" (1973: 34).

move outside existing perceptions, defining his protest in stark individual terms, to be considered next.

Deterritorializing "the Nation"

One of the points Tagore persistently makes in his essays and addresses from 1908 onwards is that the arrival of the British in India, though an entirely new chapter in India's history, it was not in itself a revolutionary break with it. He pointed out that over millennia various races and peoples have come to occupy and inhabit the geographical space that now comprises India's territory. To that end he wanted Indians to recognize that the history of the subcontinent did not belong to one particular race but was recreated time and again through the contributions of various races, the Dravidians and the Aryans, the ancient Greeks, the Persians and the Muslims. Now that the "the turn of the English" had come, he said, the Indians had neither "the right nor the power to exclude this people from building of the destiny of India" (Tagore 2001: 423-4).[25] It seems that the question of the ownership of the subcontinent was for Tagore quite irrelevant. "Whether India is to belong more to the Hindu or to the Muslim, or whether some other race is to achieve a greater supremacy – that is not the problem with which Providence is troubled," the poet told his students in 1908 in an address later published as "East and West" (Tagore 1961c: 130). In the same essay, the following striking lines emerge:

> Who are we to say that this country is ours alone? In fact, who is this "We"? Bengali, Marathi, or Punjabi, Hindu or Muslim? Only the larger "We" in whom all these – Hindu and Muslim and British and whoever else there be – must eventually unite, shall have the right to determine what is India and what is of the outside (*Ibid.*: 133).

The quotation's significance is twofold: it problematizes the imagined unity of the nation and raises the question of boundaries. The "*inter*national dimension", to draw on Homi Bhabha's important demarcation, that comes through Tagore's pluralist "We", is seen to fall as much within the "margins of the nation-space" as "in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples".[26] The unity it speaks of is not a fantasy projection of a homogenous oneness, but instead a firm acknowledgement of cultural

[25] This idea is most famously captured in the poem Pilgrimate to India" ("*Bharat Tirtha*"), written in 1910. Cf. Tagore 2004a: 200.
[26] Cf. p. 32 above.

heterogeneity. The diverse heritage that is India's true foundation, the "ambivalent nation-space" in Bhabha's language, is thereby seen as "the crossroads to a new transnational culture" implied by Tagore's "larger 'We'". Such a perspective, I wish to argue together with Bhabha, is essentially "anti-nationalist", because it stands in marked contrast with bounded, exclusivist notions of nation, not just with respect to "the outside" but also with respect to internal heterogeneity.

If ownership and territoriality were ultimately inconsequential, what was of consequence to Tagore was that India throughout her unfolding history had in her own way succeeded in accommodating the diverse races, cultures and creeds in a continuing struggle for unity in diversity. She may have been flawed in dealing with "the race problem", but in struggling with this "great difficulty", she tried "to make an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity". India's caste system, Tagore ventured to say, is the outcome of her "spirit of toleration". To incredulous Western listeners, he submitted Europe's record with respect to the indigenous populations in America and Australia, to suggest that caste-regulated toleration when pitted against "the spirit of extermination" that was Europe's solution to the problem of "race-conflict" left little room for high moral ground (e 2001: 459-61). However, Tagore was emphatically, and especially in post-Swadeshi years, a critic of India's traditional model of inclusion-through-hierarchization as a way of achieving social cohesion. He objected to the rigid boundaries set up on racial or other grounds, whereby people's lives were narrowed, "their minds crippled", so as to fit them into social forms, and deplored India's "tyrannical social restrictions" (*Ibid.*: 419; 463). The question of political freedom, and hence who ruled India, was for him secondary to pressing social issues and what the poet now held to be "India's real goal" – that of "moral and spiritual freedom for the individual in society" (*Ibid.*).

At the same time, Tagore was also already thinking in terms of a world community, so that the problems plaguing India were not seen as irrelevant to the problems facing the rest of the world: "The world-wide problem today is not how to unite by wiping out all differences, but how to unite with all differences intact" (1961d: 146). Because for him India was "the world in miniature" in the sense of "having many countries packed in one geographical receptacle", if she could create a basis of social cooperation instead of exploitation and conflict, she would be in a position to "infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of modern civilization" (2001: 443; 459).

Tagore, as has been seen, sought to assert the foundations of his country's complex identity so as to re-imagine India along open and non-sectarian lines. If ownership and territoriality are categories that needed transcending with respect to "the nation", this was because Tagore's political philosophy had a particular bent. It was poised in no uncertain terms against the nation-state. His most stringent critique of the cult of the nation came in 1917, in the publication *Nationalism*, from which we have already drawn in this section, but which needs to be considered in some more detail still.

Tagore's most critical response to the challenge of Western modernity certainly came in his rejection of the nation-state and its corollary of nationalism as a necessary form and force for social organization. The basis of unity for Tagore had to be social, rather than political. To that end, he distinguished between state and society, to replace the idea of "the nation", consistently written as "Nation" (upper case) and understood as congruent with the nation-state, possibly to stress the universalizing aspect of the concept as well as the dimensions of evil he came to associate with it, with the less restrictive idea of collectivity as embodied in his notion of society.

For him Nation meant a population welded into a political and economic union for the purpose of commercial self-interest. It was "the aspect of a whole people as an organized power" and as such an abstraction, subject to impersonal laws (2001: 421). Its objectives were singularly utilitarian and ignoble: efficiency and competition were placed in the service of material greed, power and selfishness. The supreme ideals were "to gain and not to grow" (448). Nation states generate wars and result in colonialism. Society on the other hand had no such ulterior purpose but was related to "natural regulation of human relationships" through individual ties and living sensibilities so that ideals of life could be developed through cooperation (422). Professionalization of a people vs. socialization of a people, organized and mechanical vs. natural and human – these are the opposites between which Tagore's thinking moves, as he points out that Indian languages have no concept for nation and that "India of no nation" should resist taking over this aspect, or modular form, of modernity (429).

If Tagore urged Indians to accept the many aspects of what he called "the spirit of the West", the ideals he felt were noble (the ideals of social justice and human rights), he reviled its "political civilization" (i.e. the Nation of the West) "based upon exclusiveness [and] always watchful to keep at bay the aliens or to

exterminate them" (440). The Nation "with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging" (429) was in his eyes "one of the most powerful anaesthetics that man has invented" (434). It exploited mass psychology by legitimizing people's "instincts of self-aggrandizement" through the cult of patriotism, instilling in them an unreasoning pride in their race and hatred of others (428). The crowd, Tagore warned, does not reason, it is the individual who thinks, and "pride in every form breeds blindness in the end" (455).

It is important to understand here that although "the Nation" was a product of Western history, Tagore's tirade against nationalism was decidedly global. True, *Nationalism* is substantially a critique of modernization in the West where "history has come to a stage when the moral man is more and more giving way, almost without knowing it, to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose" (424). However, his target of critique was not specifically the British government but "the government by the Nation" as it "affects the future of all humanity" (423). In actual fact, anti-British sentiments or anti-Western attitudes made little sense to Tagore, whose butt of critique was the system. "Our government", he explained, "might have been Dutch, or French, or Portuguese, and its essential features would have remained much the same as they are now" (*Ibid.*: 424).[27] Anticipating the postcolonial critiques of the nation, he foresaw the danger that "alien government" may take the shape of "our own countrymen", as one elite substitutes another (in Bhattacharya 2005: 71). He was also rightly suspect of the nationalists' motives: "Your main motive is hatred of the foreigner, not love of country" (*Ibid.*: 70). Unlike the later Marxists, as pointed out by Kopf, Tagore did not place his trust in a simple change of system or turnover of classes as a path to social salvation (1988: 305). His search for liberation was altogether more radical and more all-encompassing.

Nationalism was endemic to the world, and Tagore condemns every variety of it, including the anti-colonial one. Some saw in this an apology for British imperialism, but Tagore could not have been fiercer in denouncing imperialism. Where the problem for the nationalists who derided Tagore's pull-out from politics lay was that Tagore convincingly argued that "aggressive nationalism and

[27] "Alien government in India is a kind of chameleon. Today it is seen in the guise of the Englishman, tomorrow it may take the form of some other foreigner, and the following day, its malignity unabated, it will bear the semblance of our own countrymen" (Tagore 1961j: 255).

imperialism were two faces of the same monster" (*Ibid.*). This problem, he moreover recognized, was not in it being a Western ideology, but in it being a hindrance to the pursuit of greater human flourishing anywhere. So while he condemned the politicized and commercialized aspect of the modern civilization that sprung up from the West, but held onto "modernism" and "universalism" of the new age, distinguishing sharply between modernization and Westernization:

> Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans; or in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons [...] certainly modernism is not in their ladies' bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought, not tutelage under European schoolmasters (Tagore 2001: 446)

Another problem of the nation state in Tagore's view is that it deludes people into thinking they are free, but having political freedom does not necessarily guarantee freedom, merely power (462). "Not merely the subject races", he would declaim, "but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are every day sacrificing your freedom and humanity to the fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic" (427). Only he has freedom who loves freedom itself and is willing to extend it to others. For Tagore freedom in the mere sense of independence is meaningless. His belief derived from the Upanishads that we are truer to ourselves the more we realize ourselves in others, as well as his personal sense of "the infinite being" that runs through all and unites the individual's mind with the universe, has led him to put a premium on interrelationship and interdependence rather than self-sufficiency and independence.[28]

The nation state, though ostensibly holding up the values of freedom, actually strikes at the very heart of those values in its treatment of others, effectively creating "huge organizations of slavery in the disguise of freedom" (462). Attentive also to internal social hierarchies, Tagore saw how easily *real* freedom is sacrificed in the cause of political freedom. Tagore's play *Red Oleanders* (*Rakta-karavi*, 1926) is a powerful defence of freedom against a terror-projecting power on the one side and a soul-wrecking conformism on the other.

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[28] More on this in the next chapter, pp.93-4.

Clearly Tagore's thinking moved outside the framework of freedom being tied to political and territorial sovereignty. How can one uphold the ideals of human justice and freedom and then confine them to narrowly-defined territorial units? In this, he can be seen to reject the dominant Western notion of citizenship linked to the nation-state and presented as *the* way by which people gained equal status and freedom, arguing persistently this was a fundamentally exclusionary framework (cf. Purkayastha 2003: 49-50). The cataclysmic events of the First World War, against which Tagore wrote *Nationalism*, were for him proof enough of the ultimate self-destructiveness of the organized modern nation. He sought to understand the deeper principles as to why people are driven to destroy each other:

> If you want me to take to butchering human beings, you must break up that wholeness of my humanity through some discipline which makes my will dead, my thoughts numb, my movements automatic, and then from the dissolution of the complex personal man will come out that abstraction, that destructive force, which has no relation to human truth, and therefore can be easily brutal or mechanical [...] Turn a tree into a log and it will burn for you, but it will never bear living flowers and fruit (2001: 432).

As he said elsewhere, he was terrified of "an abstraction which is ready to ignore living reality" (in Bhattacharya 2005: 58), and for him such an abstraction or discipline, for the reasons discussed, was precisely "the idea of the Nation" embodied in the cult of nationalism.

To this idea Tagore contrasts his ideal of social, complete man. "Man in his fullness is not powerful, but perfect [and] when we are fully human, we cannot fly at one another's throats; our instincts of social life, our traditions or moral ideals stand in the way" (2001: 431). He acknowledged that as far as human relations are concerned self-love and self-interest do have a part to play, but as essentially baser instincts, they remain dangerously incomplete, if not counteracted by man's "higher instincts of sympathy and mutual help" (454). While self-respect is important, it cannot be allowed to degenerate into egoism. We have seen how in his Swadeshi days he made a powerful appeal to his people to stand together in self-respect and self-reliance, but he would not tolerate chauvinism and violence.

Taking lessons from nature, Tagore observed that all living things are easily hurt and therefore require protection. What truly protected man in his view were his "spiritual ideals, which have their vital connection with his life and grow with his

growth" (446). And these ideals, Tagore argued, "own no geographical boundaries or national self-seeking" but are part of the spiritual heritage of both "East" and "West" (442). Tagore, as can be more readily appreciated now, had to withdraw from a nationalist ethos to re-imagine a world guided by relationships different to those mandated by self-interest. At the heart of his moral philosophy was the belief that "men are so closely knit that when you strike others the blow comes back to yourself" (447). This led him to predict the eventual demise of nation-states and nationalisms, and anticipate a time when "man will have his new birth, in the freedom of his individuality, from the enveloping vagueness of abstraction" (435). Given the falseness of Tagore's predictions, it is perhaps necessary to see his utopian construction of *samaj*, as Bharucha has argued, in its proper place as "a politics of hope" (2006: 109).[29]

This is not to devalue the suggestiveness of what E. P. Thompson has designated as Tagore's "anti-politics". His quite unique position "that power should not be matched by the organization of anti-power, but should be ignored" is in itself an alternative to the irreconcilable polarity of nation and no-nation. It found concrete expression in Tagore's concerns for social welfare, education, and the overcoming of caste and religious barriers. In Thompson's estimation, Tagore, "more than any other thinker of his time, had a clear conception of civil society, as something distinct from and of stronger and more personal texture than political and economic structures" (1991: 14).

Indeed, the strength of Tagore's position lies in that he spoke up for individual rather than national rights, and held onto the values of universalism in the face of fierce nationalist pressures. We are reminded once again of Gora's painful transition, where "Indianness", in Bharucha's cogent analysis, meant a birth of "an inner self [...] ready to embrace the universe" rather than "a politically determined self" circumvented by caste, creed or, we might add, nation (Bharucha 2006: 64).[30]

The fact that Tagore opposed the British rule, but was not anti-British, that he rejected anti-colonial nationalism as a viable stand against British imperialism, is what made him amenable to charges of denationalized Anglophilism or insufficient patriotism or even imperialism – unstated assumptions that inform also more recent

[29] See Bharucha's retort to the politically realist critique of Tagore's views made by Partha Chatterjee, 2006: 105-11. For Chatterjee's contributions, cf. 2003; 2004.
[30] For Gora's psychological transformation see also Nandy 2005a: 34-50.

writing, as we shall see.[31] Tagore knew full well that his alternative was out of tune with the prevalent mood of his times, alienating as it did both the extremists and the orthodox. Like Nikhelish at the end of *The Home and the World*, he too must have felt pangs of abandonment but resolved to carry on with his self-designated path:

> My trial is hard indeed. Just when I want a helpmate most, I am thrown back on myself alone. Nevertheless, I record my vow that even in this trial I shall win through. Alone, then, shall I tread my thorny path to the end of this life's journey (2005: 197).

Nikhelish's life ends tragically in the midst of communal violence – "[...] a bullet through the heart. He is done for" (*Ibid.*: 203) – a sinister foreboding of Gandhi's fate at the hands of extremism – while Tagore takes up the work of education of the Hindu and Muslim tenants in his family's agricultural estates in eastern Bengal, a project which he later developed into the Sriniketan rural upliftment programme based on promoting agricultural economy.[32] The start of Tagore's project more or less coincided with Gandhi's launch of the Non-Cooperation movement, the next mass anti-colonial nationalist movement after Swadeshi had gone into decline at around 1908. Tagore found himself once again reiterating his belief in a constructive programme, this time directly at odds with the basic principle of non-cooperation and the boycott of British goods and institutions. Try hard as he did, he could not accept the negative tenets of non-cooperation, and in his polemic with Gandhi (further discussed in the following chapter), it is clear that Tagore harboured no illusions about the "anti-political" choice he had taken, the only choice suited to his temperament and beliefs: "If you cannot keep step with your countrymen at the great crisis of their history, never say that you are right and the rest of them are wrong; only give up your role as a soldier, go back to your corner as a poet, be ready to accept popular derision and disgrace" (in Bhattacharya 2005: 56).

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[31] The problem seems to lie in the assumption, as identified by Sarkar, that "the entire field of early-twentieth-century Bengal (and Indian) history was, or should have been, occupied by the single colonial/anti-colonial binary", Sarkar 2002: 117. You had to be a nationalist in order to be anti-colonial.

[32] For further discussion of Tagore's rural reconstruction programme cf. Sen 1989; Das Gupta 1991 and 2009.

Love of "India"

From all that we have said, it would be wrong to assume that Tagore's pull-out from active political life and his subsequent tirade against nationalism spelt the end to his anti-imperialist politics or his protest against the Raj. In actual fact, Tagore, even in his post-Swadeshi years, never strayed far from the political concerns of his country, despite his preferred vocation as a poet. He was always the first to speak up publicly should an occasion demand it. His resignation of knighthood after the British had gunned down an unarmed gathering of people in the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre in 1919 is a case in point.

Part of the complexity of Tagore's response to colonialism is precisely in that he was able to make important distinctions between nationalism and anti-imperialism, and as some critics would have it, patriotism, distinctions that would not have existed in the minds of most Indians in his day. Ashis Nandy, who has contributed significantly to this debate, asserts that Tagore's was the ideology of "patriotism" rather than nationalism. It was the poet's undeniable *Bharatchinta* or *swadeshchinta* (literally "thinking about India or one's own country", terms borrowed from Arabindo Poddar) that, Nandy argues, underpinned his version of "universalism" and can be seen to convey an "idea of patriotism without 'nationalism'". In other words, "patriotism", unlike nationalism, is not incompatible with higher laws of humanity and can transcend political and geographical barriers (2005a: 80-5).

We might be getting ourselves into an irresolvable conceptual tangle here, but, in my view, we are missing something important from Tagore's complex response, if his particular configuration of *anti-nationalist anti-imperialism* is seen as no more than a kind of self-reflexive "patriotism" that has "a built-in critique of nationalism".[33] While it is necessary to reconcile Tagore's tirade against nationalism, including that of the freedom struggle, with his love of "India", I wonder if "patriotism" is the right terminological receptacle for that, since, as Amartya Sen has quite correctly pointed out, "Tagore's censure of patriotism has been a persistent theme in his writing" (Sen 2005a: xix).

Certainly, in Tagore's usage of the word in his English writings, patriotism does not stand apart from nationalism. We have seen already in *Nationalism* that the cult of the nation and the cult of patriotism are reviled indiscriminately, used more or

[33] For further similar responses to Nandy, cf. Sarkar 2005: 117; 128-9; Bharucha 2006: 80-83.

less as synonyms, and both seen as abstract, impersonal constructs to be resisted.[34] There is also plenty of evidence in Tagore's political novels (which Nandy takes up for detailed analysis) to show that "patriotism" did not really stand apart from "nationalism" in Tagore's conceptual world. In *Four Chapters* (*Char Adhyay*, 1934), for example, Atin, having been recruited to the revolutionary cause by Ela, a beautiful woman he is in love with but who herself had pledged allegiance to her country and is not free to act on her own feelings for Atin, outrightly condemns her patriotic betrothal: "This pledge of yours was a crime and, every day you keep it up, you commit a fresh outrage against your own nature" (Tagore 2002a: 37). Moreover, the ideology of "country" is seen to be a fake imposition: "What right have you, let me ask, to deliver me up to the country, or to any one else? [...] the place you've assigned me, calling it country—which after all is nothing but a country of your band's own make—whatever it may mean to others, it's nothing but a cage for me" (*Ibid.*: 44-45). Two chapters later we read: "The patriotism of those who have no faith in that which is above patriotism is like a crocodile's back used as a ferry to cross the river" (Ibid: 77). Tagore's profound scepticism of patriotism on the grounds of its violation of what is human and personal is a recurrent theme in these novels, where the main protagonists rediscover their selves through ties of love and intimate relationship.

If nation-state was one of the precepts of modernity Tagore refused to accept as an unproblematic given, patriotism, it seems to me, was another. We have seen that Tagore differentiated between the idea of a nation/a people/a community and the political organization of the nation-state, introducing the looser and open-ended alternative of "society" to designate the former, because Tagore's "India" was an essentially deteritorrialized concept, subject to free and voluntary associations between individuals and cultures, and thus uncircumscribed by politico-geographical borders:

> I love India, but my India is an Idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I am *not* a patriot – I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world. You are one of them and I am sure there are many others (emphasis author's, letter to C. F. Andrews, 1921, in Andrews ed. 2002: 119).

[34] See Tagore's citation from *Nationalism* on p.74 above.

Perhaps he was unwittingly harping back to the old Sanskrit cosmopolis that Sheldon Pollock has reconstructed for us as a world extending from today's Afghanistan to Java and from Sri Lanka to Nepal created by a voluntary circulation of traders, literati, religious professionals, and freelance adventurers, where it would not be in the slightest bit odd to find a Chinese traveller studying Sanskrit grammar in Sumatra in the seventh century, for example (Pollock 2000: 603; 599). It is hard to imagine that Tagore would have subscribed to the coterminous old Roman, Latin brand of cosmopolitanism, where *kosmos*, in Pollock's analysis, was forcefully made to tally with the *polis*, the city-state, under the banner of a conquest church (*Ibid.*: 601). Certainly for Tagore it was not acceptable to have communication, love or creative aspirations bound by geo-political boundaries. He was going against the tide of history, but kept repeating nonetheless that Indians will "truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (2001: 456).

Was Tagore's renunciation of knighthood then primarily an act of "patriotism"?[35] Are we not missing something vital, if we put down his outrage to "patriotic" concerns, or to "nationalism", as Harish Trivedi does when he writes that Tagore's response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre constitutes "the most decisive nationalist act of his whole life" (1995: 59)? Insofar as an Indian of considerable standing sides with his countrymen against the colonizers and voices their protest through this gesture, this can arguably constitute a patriotic act, albeit one imposed from the outside through interpretation. But insofar as Tagore's rationale behind the protest is considered, I would argue it has less to do with his wounded sensibility as an Indian, and more to do with the fact that the act of opening fire on a defenceless crowd was an insult to humanity, the measuring rod of Tagore's moral compass. That this was a protest mounted in the name of humanity rather than any patriotic motivation or political capital-making is also made clear from Tagore's subsequent emphatic refusal to give support to having a memorial built at Jalianwalla Bagh (cf. Mahalanobis 1985: 13-14).

Since morality cannot be delimited by group loyalty or made subordinate to race or nationality, Tagore did not stop short at India's own door. Throughout his long career, he would condemn countless atrocities the world over. He spoke against Japanese imperialist attack on Koreans, African slavery, and as in his essay "The

[35] See Tagore's letter to the viceroy in which he repudiated his knighthood, in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 223-4.

Changing Age" (1933), he condemned "the horrors of European rule in the African province of Congo", the treacheries of opium trade in China, the strangling of the youth movement in Iran, and the list could go on (Tagore 19611: 349).

As for his "patriotism", we need to consider the Bengali word for it: "*deshprem*", which literally means the love of land or place.[36] Far less abstract a notion than "patriotism" (i.e. love of country/nation), for which Tagore harboured deep distrust, and like nationalism perceived it an alien imposition, *deshprem* suggests rather more local and therefore intimate ties with a particular place and its people. Tagore's *deshprem* certainly led him to endorse a form of resistance quite different to his nationalist compatriots.

> Swadeshi, Swarajism, ordinarily produce intense excitement in the minds of my countrymen, because they carry in them some fervour of passion generated by the exclusiveness of their range. It cannot be said that I am untouched by this heat and movement. But somehow, by my temperament as a poet, I am incapable of accepting these objects as final. They claim from us a great deal more than is their due. After a certain point is reached, I find myself obliged to separate myself from my own people, with whom I have been working, and my soul cries out: The complete man must never be sacrificed to the patriotic man, or even to the merely moral man. To me humanity is rich and large and many-sided (Tagore, in Andrews ed. 2002: 91-2).

In the final analysis, Tagore's anti-colonial resistance is shaped through a holding onto moral values, rather than a protest mounted for superficial and immediate gain. There is nothing dogmatic about this view, except for the belief that meaningful change can only ever come about from critical introspection by individuals and societies at large. The bias towards one's own country implicit in patriotism and nationalism was for Tagore an obstacle to the larger goal of freedom from race-consciousness, but he also understood the very human and deep-seated nature of that bias, and was not himself always above it.[37] Nonetheless, his continuous struggle remained thinking and working outside the narrow constraints of identity politics. His alignment in creative writing with the wandering Baul sect, his imaginative association with the outcast, the pilgrim, a wayfarer, stripped of name and identity, not unlike the character in his poem "A Person" (1932, in Tagore

[36] William Radice, conversation, 28/10/2008.

[37] The most notable example of this is Tagore's belligerent response to Edward Thompson's well-intended biography of the poet. For more cf. Trivedi 1992: a17-36.

2003a: 169-7), and finally, his self-imposed exile at home – all point in the direction of superseding bounded and normative identities.

If Tagore's rejection of nationalism (a force he saw operating in imperialism, be it Western or non-Western, imperialist or anti-colonial), as evinced in his lectures is taken seriously, as I believe it should be, this suggests to me that Tagore indeed advocated, in theory and practice, what one can reasonably call post-nationalist, or *universalist* thinking. But if this is then tempered by his earnest and self-avowed commitment to "India" (explicitly defined as "no-nation"), then we are presented with a case in which the particular/local/regional, or in a word, *vernacular* allegiances, are in a perpetual two-way traffic with, rather than opposition to, universalist tendencies. The next chapter considers in more detail Tagore's post-Swadeshi era, an era which culminated in 1913 with the reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature and launched him overnight as a *vishvakabi* ("world poet"). Over the next decade and a half, Tagore effectively travelled the world. In what manner this strengthened his global outlook and what, more precisely, are the contours of his universalism, is what we explore next.

3. THE WORLD AND THE INDIVIDUAL: MEETING OF CULTURES

> Truth does not know of East and West.
>
> Tagore, "Ideals of Education"

After an intense personal involvement with the Swadeshi movement and the disillusionment that followed, Tagore, as we have seen, underwent a shift in attitude that can best be described as a turn away from nationalism towards universalism. Universalism of course, as we saw in the previous chapter, had been there all along – as part of Tagore's upbringing, rooted in his family and wider social history. It is evidenced amply in Tagore's earlier writings, and while it is important to see his intellectual growth in terms of this shift, universalism for Tagore was not a novelty. What was new was his overcoming of nationalism.

Therefore, at one level, as I have shown, this was a rejection of a politics of identity that splits people along the lines of nation, religion, caste, ethnicity, race or other, which for Tagore served goals of social exclusion, hierarchy and violence (cf. Hogan 2003: 16-17). At another, and this particular aspect of Tagore's universalism is the focus of this chapter, it meant an adoption of a global outlook that objected to the ownership of ideas in the sphere of knowledge. That is to say that rather than intpreting intellectual products of various groups or peoples along racialised or hereditary lines, it saw them as part of human heritage at large. This was essentially an argument for agency and creativity in a colonized setting where the cultural choice presenting itself seemed overwhelmingly determined by the either/or logic: either to assimilate an alien modernity (and effectively conform) or return to the spurious authenticity of pre-colonial roots and origins (shutting oneself off from the modern-day developments). Tagore understood this to be the prevalent, but intolerable, choice and sought out possibilities, intellectually and practically, that would potentially deconstruct this binary logic and strive for an alternative form of modernity. I will first consider his intellectual arguments that position India vis-à-vis the world, then move on to consider how these informed his practical answers to the

challenges of colonial modernity by looking at his educational efforts at Santiniketan in conjunction with his foreign travels.

Colonial ambivalence

The nature of colonial rule has been subject to varying interpretations, varying from emphasis on economic and political subjugation to interpretations focusing on the cultural hegemony of the imperial power over the dominated society. The cultural focus of anti-colonial critique was given an unprecedented boost with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). But the extrapolation of cultural conquest from a political one, often interpreted to be the subtext of Said's thesis, has since been widely criticized.[1]

The simple theoretical model of domination and conquest on the part of the colonizer and passive acquiescence on the part of the colonized has now been superseded by an acknowledgment that under colonialism the movement of ideas was not a matter of one-way traffic but worked both ways, and that the encounter produced initiatives and ideas that were subsequently novel to both sides. It was a matter of "transaction", "an interactive, dialogic, two-way process [...] involving complex negotiation and exchange," to borrow from Harish Trivedi's important intervention in the field of postcolonial studies (Trivedi 1995: 1). And yet, we are made to wonder how surpassed the old model actually is, when confronted by Trivedi's treatment of Tagore in the very same book *Colonial Transactions*.

Here the argued-for agency approach announced in the introduction is strikingly at odds with the author's conclusions about "the greatest Indian writer of the colonial age", since, in the final analysis, Tagore for Trivedi was but "a child of his English-Liberal times and upbringing in both what he gave and what he received, poetically as well as politically". It is indeed astonishing to have Trivedi regard Tagore's achievements in terms of the poet's "largely acquiescent individual pulse" (*Ibid.*: 64). This almost seems to resurrect some of the orientalist ghosts of the British press at the height of Tagore's fame in England, when the Indian poet was conceived mainly as a product of the strength and vitality of British rule and civilization in India.[2] The close convergence Trivedi then observes between English Liberal

[1] See, amongst others, Porter 1983; Young 1990; Ahmad 2006: 159-219. For a debate of these issues in relation to India, cf. Raychaudhuri 2007.

[2] "[U]nder the strong shield of our Empire', wrote one reviewer, 'the genius of this Bengali singer found itself and flourished" (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 10/05/1915, in Kundu et al, eds. 2000: 197).

thought (perceived as the ideological foundation stone of British imperialism) and Tagore's own intellectual stance – Tagore had "internalis[ed] an idealised version of the English Liberal conceptualisation of its imperial project" – also makes him regard Tagore's "'apolitical' internationalism and universalism" to be entirely of a coherent piece with British imperialism. And it is this – predictable? – conflation of universalism with imperialism (discussed in chapter one), together with a monolithic approach to the subject, that I want to challenge with respect to Tagore, notwithstanding the question that if Tagore, as Trivedi seems to suggest, was but a mouthpiece for the colonizers' ideologies, what then was so "artistically compelling" about his response. We must indeed take cognizance of the "complex negotiations and exchange" of the colonial encounter, to follow Trivedi's own precepts, if we are to get a fairer sense of Tagore's anti-imperialist universalist intellectual position (*Ibid.*: 64; 1).

To begin with, rather than seeing him as a child of English-liberal times, as Trivedi does, I would suggest that we see him as a child of *ambivalent* colonial times, for every culture under foreign domination finds itself in "an ambivalent position" as regards the foreign culture (Berlin 1997: 158). The inequality of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized puts a severe strain on the exchange of knowledge. In the eighty years of Tagore's life, the encounter between Britain and India "came close to a clash of civilizations and had to be resolved piecemeal by adjustments at various levels of Indian life" (Das Gupta 2006: 1). One particular aspect of the colonial ambivalence that Tagore addresses time and again in his writings relates precisely to the question of freeing up intellectual transactions and moving beyond the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. Regarding this to be an imperative of his age, Tagore, I suggest, is speaking from a deeply-felt historical and existential dilemma pertaining to societies in general. Berlin captures the dilemma spot on:

> [...] it may happen that the foreign culture has made a deep impress upon my own, and even when, in some respects, it has made inroads upon it, distorted it, and partially enslaved my own civilisation, yet once I have tasted it, I cannot expel it from my system without great damage, cannot reject or blind myself to what is true and good or delightful or noble merely because it comes from the wrong quarter (1997: 158).

How to resist colonial onslaught and humiliation without jeopardizing your own humanity or surrendering your own individuality – be it through disallowing it to grow (as in isolationism) or through violation of humanity's basic principles (as in terrorism and violence) – shaped a large part of Tagore's questioning and concerns. In the wide spectrum of responses generated by the British rule in India, Tagore's evolving position eventually stood out in its conviction that the colonial situation be used creatively to the long-term advantage of the Indian people (and he was not thinking merely of the elites) above and over the historical fact of colonial rule and its injustices. The man himself is probably the most celebrated proof of "the great flowering of writers, poets and thinkers" that was part of "the creative response", as Amit Chaudhuri puts it, of a particular section of the Indian society "coming to terms and shaping changes in their history and identity" – the phenomenon known as "the Bengal Renaissance" (2002: xix). I begin by exploring the poet's reading of the impact of the West on the making of the "*nava yuga*" (new age), incidentally one of the indigenous terms for what later became known as "the Bengal Renaissance".[3]

The *nava yuga*: "East" meets "West"

In the already mentioned essay "The Changing Age" (1933), Tagore frames the founding moment of *nava yuga* in terms of India's contact with Europe.[4] This contact, he says, had awakened India to the "great gift of knowledge in its universal aspects" – in both the world of science and politics. If in the former one could speak of "the universal laws of cause and effect", the cornerstone of scientific inquiry for which Tagore had great respect, in the latter it advanced the injunction that "all men [are] equal before the Law" (1961l: 343-4).

Though the context of colonial subjugation glaringly undermined the verities promised by the political discourse of universal human rights established by the Enlightenment philosophers, it did not, Tagore argued, reduce the value of the ideals of freedom and individual liberty. "If, today, we challenge our rulers with demands which we would not have dreamed of presenting to the Mughal Emperor," he wrote, "it is because of the ideal voiced in the words of the poet: 'a man's a man for a' that'". There is significance in the fact that Tagore linked this "novel point of view"

[3] For a genealogy of the term, cf. Ray 2003a.
[4] Bengali colonial experience was unique in that Bengal was the first area where extended contact between India and Europe took place, and where Bengalis took an active part in participating and assessing the new influences.

with the domain of poetry (the above lines are taken from Robert Burns) rather than the sphere of politics, drawing a vital link between creative practice and social change.[5] From reading English literature, he asserted, Indians had gained "the will to break man's tyranny over man" (*Ibid.*: 345-6).[6]

How, we may ask, did Tagore resolve the discrepancy between the ideals voiced in literature and the reality of men running empires (by 1870s the belief in the benevolence of the British Empire had become more or less untenable)? Here we see Tagore introducing a distinction that allows him to hold on to his faith in "the British character" as culled from literature (but also experienced personally through a number of British friends), while he condemns the "British conqueror" (*Ibid.*: 347).[7] The *boro ingreji* (great Englishman) is set off against the "little" Englishman in his book *Kalantar* (lit. the changing age), just as "the spirit of the West" was seen to be at loggerheads with "the Nation of the West" (2001: 425). Such distinctions, however simplified they may at first seem, are in fact good strategies for gaining a more balanced and discriminate sense of a conflictive reality.

Certainly Tagore understood the dangers of attitudes that would both lean too heavily towards infatuation with the West and dismiss out of hand native traditions (because blinded by the display of imperial power), or, at the opposite extreme, reject the West wholesale and find an emotional outlet in chauvinism:

> The reaction of disillusionment is just as unreal as the first shock of illusion. We must try to come to that normal state of mind, by which we can clearly discern our own danger and avoid it, without being unjust towards the source of that danger (*Ibid.*: 450).

Tagore's was going to be "the difficult middle path" or "the narrow causeway", to borrow from Berlin, which was to avoid both the trends of "radical modernism" and "proud and gloomy traditionalism" (1997: 160; 165). Understanding "the natural temptation" to retaliate and "pay back Europe in her own coin", Tagore implores his countrymen to use the historical crisis for self-conscious reflexivity (indispensable to an emancipatory strain of nationalism), so as not to end up imitating Europe "in one of her worst features which comes out in her behaviour to people whom she describes as yellow or red, brown or black". He takes his argument further still in

[5] This link will be given detailed attention with reference to Kosovel in chapter six.
[6] For the impact the romantic poets had on Tagore, cf. "The Poet's Religion" in Tagore 2002c: 1-30.
[7] For Tagore's friendships, see correspondence volumes: Lago ed. 1972; Andrews ed. 2002; Das Gupta ed. 2003.

what Nandy has described as transforming "passionate self-other" debates into "self-self" debates to insist that Indians acknowledge their own record of "treating with utter disdain and cruelty men who belonged to a particular creed, colour or caste (Tagore 2001: 450). Or, as he put it in another, earlier, essay: "These faults of the English hurt us only because we have them ourselves" (1961f: 194). Or, indeed, as he wrote in one of the songs from the (original Bengali) *Gitanjali*:

> O my unfortunate land, for all those you shame,
> the insult you endure shall be the same.
>
> (1910, in Tagore 2008: 129)

If Tagore described the imperial face of Europe as based on exclusiveness and discrimination, he also recognized that this trait had a corresponding Indian face in caste distinctions. Either a Brahmin exercising his inviolable rights against a member of the lower castes or an officer of the British Empire victimising his subjects, both are perpetrators against human decency. On the same principle that the Indians would challenge British authority, they must rise up to the authority of their own indigenous practices. Political freedom cannot be built on "the quicksand of social slavery" (2001: 462) but must lead to, once again with Said, a "larger search for liberation" (1994: 265). This was a double-speared critique, grounded in universalist ethos. It is what gave Tagore's anti-colonialism a significantly broader base.

Tagore, as we have seen at the beginning of this section, acknowledged his debt to the European Enlightenment thought in this respect, but it is important to understand that the notion of universal ethical principles has a counterpart, as pointed out by Hogan, in the fundamental principles of *sadharanadharma*, or "universal dharma" (2000: 309). Complex a notion as *dharma* is, attempts to bring it close to Western understanding have translated the concept into "ethical duty" that provides "the pattern of life". From the Sanskrit word meaning "nature", dharma relates to things behaving in the way they behave because of what they are (i.e. it is the dharma of fire to burn, water to flow, and so on).[8] In relation to human agents it implies duty and tells me what I should do with respect to the various binding social links, for example as wife, daughter, son, teacher, warrior, householder and so on. Though

[8] Cf. Tagore: "*Dharma* is the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. *Dharma* is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self. When any wrong is done we say that *dharma* is violated, meaning that the lie has been given to our nature" (2002a: 79).

classical texts on dharma distinguish several types of dharma, in popular Hinduism and common practice the notion tends to get reduced to the hierarchical doctrines of familial dharma and caste dharma (*varnadharma*). In contrast to these dharma types which vary from individual to individual and situation to situation, there is *sadharanadharma* or *manavadharma* ("human dharma") that stands in direct opposition to any form of dharma governed by distinctions of caste, stage of life, etc. In other words, universal dharma applies to all individuals and is binding for all (Hogan 2000a: 214).

The two most important principles of universal dharma that Hogan singles out are those of truth and *ahimsa* (commonly translated as "non-violence" but more precisely meaning "restraint from infliction of pain"). When violence is commissioned or sanctioned by a specific dharma, these principles of *sadharanadharma* can be invoked to dispute it. In principle *sadharanadharma* should have higher authority over *varnadharma*, but this is not always the case, not even in theory (*Ibid.*: 216). Nonetheless, the universal ethical principles that it provides were drawn on by people like Gandhi and Tagore and placed at the very centre of anti-colonial struggle. Indeed, "[w]hat makes colonialism wrong is not any difference between Indians and English [... but] that it purveys violence and untruth, which is adharmic for any agent and any object" (Hogan 2003: 16). By implication, therefore, when the "most violent, the most extreme, the cruellest elements of Hindu thought" became valorised as indispensable to India's gaining independence, both Gandhi and Tagore, their differences notwithstanding, were joined "against virtually the entire world order, that of the colonizers and the colonized, that of the bosses and the slaves" (*Ibid.*: 15).[9] Though *sadharanadharma* must necessarily place one on the side of the oppressed in any existing – world and societal – hierarchy, oblivious as it is to group demarcations and loyalties, it counteracts the rule of might everywhere, pushing beyond the colonial binary logic.

While this is just one aspect of Hindu universalism upon which Tagore could draw for addressing the repressive elements of dominant cultural practices at home, Hogan and others draw our attention also to the Vedantic principle that all individual souls are ultimately identical in Brahman, not to mention that it was in the Upanishads that Tagore discovered his philosophy of the One in the Many (Hogan

[9] Hogan is here drawing specifically on the work of Nandy 1983: 7; 24.

2003: 12; 16; DasGupta 2003: 88-100 [96]).[10] There is no dearth of resources within Tagore's own Hindu tradition, more precisely Brahmo tradition (the Tagores defined themselves as Brahmos who drew heavily on the Upanishads, as discussed in the previous chapter), as well as India's many other traditions for opposing a system that privileges a few over the many – certainly Tagore's distaste for (political) violence has obvious roots in India's intellectual traditions – and Tagore can be seen to dig deep into and across the many religious and literary possessions of his land to come up, for example, with an essentially universalist reading of religious personalities such as Buddha, Nanak, Kabir, Caitanya and others (Tagore 2001: 453). This is understandable also because the historical evolution of Bengali literary culture is closely tied to a number of anti-Brahmanical heterodox religious experiments, beginning with Buddhist poetical compositions, *caryapadas,* through to the *padavali* poetry of the medieval Vainsava tradition (cf. Kaviraj 2003: 514-29).

When we consider that Tagore brought this enormous intellectual inheritance to bear on modern concepts of humanism that contact with European thought had exposed him to, especially the writings of the English liberal tradition, it becomes absurd to see in him someone who had supposedly surrendered his individuality, as Trivedi seems to be implying. Rather, one might suggest with the eminent twentieth-century Indian philosopher K. C. Bhattacharya, that in some cases "the foreign ideal is [...] in our own ideal", or, even, if that is not the case, one is obliged to accept "the guru or teacher [...] when he is found to be a real guru, whatever the community from which he comes" (Bhattacharya 1984: 390).[11] Tagore understood this and did not shy away from claiming as his own any thought or belief system that resonated with his own views, ideas and aspirations, regardless of its origins. He could certainly make a virtue out of "borrowing", which in any case need not be imitation:

> The sign of greatness in great geniuses is their enormous capacity to borrow, very often without their knowing it; they have an unlimited credit in the world market of culture. Only mediocrities are ashamed and afraid of borrowing, for they do not know how to pay back their debt in their own coin (Tagore 2002b: 71).

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[10] In an intriguing essay on Tagore's reading of the classical Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, Amit Chaudhuri argues that Tagore gives the ideals of Western Enlightenment and humanism, compromised through their compulsion to dominate and colonize, a truer and more humane source in India's antiquity. Cf. 'Two Giant Brothers: Tagore's Revisionist 'Orient' (Chaudhuri 2008: 122-39).

[11] Cf. Sen 2005 to understand that the traditions of rationality, science, scepticism have a long lineage in India and that the Enlightenment secular values that have found political expression in "Nehruvian" democracy are not accidental or a gift from the West. Cf. 'Argufying: On Amartya Sen and the Deferral of Indian Modernity' (Chaudhuri 2008: 100-8).

We should also not underestimate a dynamics in which imported ideas are reshaped in a new setting and put to diverse individual and collective uses. Indeed, this particular response which drew on both India's pre-colonial and Europe's post-Enlightenment intellectual traditions "more often than not, strengthened the ability to contest Western colonial power in the arenas of politics and the state" (Bose and Jalal 1998: 112).

Over the past decade or so theorists have been increasingly challenging the stereotyped view of colonized people as lacking agency, or their role as victims, stressing instead the resilience and adaptability of colonial societies as well as their inventive and independent contributions to the project of cultural autonomy (Ashcroft 2001: 2). Regarding India, Tapan Raychaudhuri has pertinently spoken of the western encounter as a "catalyst", rejecting the view of "denationalizing surrender" (2002: 355).[12]

Prefiguring many of the ongoing contemporary debates, Tagore himself stressed both the novelty and identity of Indian culture in the wake of the colonial encounter – in the Fanonian sense of setting the culture moving in both self-critical introspection and branching out to the world. His own reading of the impact of the West on the making of *nava yuga* gives due recognition to the many achievements of his predecessors, from the outset of Indian modernity. Significantly too, he sees himself in direct lineage through goals and orientation with them, particularly with Rammohun Roy.

From his Presidential address at Roy's death centenary meeting, held on 18 February 1933 at the Senate House in Calcutta, it is clear that Tagore holds up the polyglot scholar as an exemplary figure who had opened the doors of Bengali culture to "new words from other languages, and to new ideas" and build on the "the true products of [India's] civilization the superstructure of an international culture". For Tagore, Roy combined the attempt "to establish our peoples on the full consciousness of their own cultural personality" – Tagore's speaks consistently of cultural personality and not national identity – while, simultaneously, "make them approach other civilizations in the spirit of sympathetic cooperation" (Tagore EW 3: 667-9 [668]).

This twin task of deriving a historicized sense of one's own cultural self on the one hand and of engaging in an inter-civilizational dialogue on the other, Tagore felt to be as much his lot in the early decades of the twentieth century as it was Roy's

[12] Cf. also Ray 2001; Dasgupta 2006.

a hundred years before him. From the vantage point of an expanded stage of the modern world, Tagore too wanted Indians to gain a strong sense of their cultural identity-cum-personality, but the means to attaining it, he believed, lay necessarily in the direction of cultural exchange and global cooperation. For, the dilemma facing the modern world, and potentially affecting everyone, seemed straightforward enough, even if a viable solution was not: different peoples and civilizations have irretrievably come together and can either fight each other or they can try and find "true basis of reconciliation and mutual help" (Tagore 2001: 461). It is here we see Tagore adopting a world-historical perspective striving to reposition India as well as the individual within the global framework.

"What is the great fact of this age?" Tagore would ask time and again to acknowledge, with optimism and high expectations, that it was the meeting of different cultures and worldviews: "The human races have been exposed to each other, physically and intellectually. The shells, which have so long given them full security within their individual enclosures, have been broken, and by no artificial process can they be mended again". This for Tagore was an irreversible fact requiring a mental readjustment (2002b: 71). So, he spoke of the need for our countries "to harmonize our growth with world tendencies [...] to prove our worth to the whole world not merely to admiring groups of our own people [...] to justify our own existence." Problems which had previously been of local make were now affecting much larger areas. Solutions could no longer be found "in the seclusion of our own national workshops" but had to be sought in cooperation with different cultures, through intercultural negotiations (*Ibid.*: 76).

However much Tagore deplored that the meeting of cultures had come primarily on the back of commercial exploitation and imperial conquest, he wanted to move beyond the static and oppositional view of civilizations and stress the limitless potential for everyone – the colonizer and colonized alike – to realize a new, more consummate, identity. To understand the dynamics of this potential change we must say something about Tagore's notion of freedom as it is linked to his understanding of the individual.

Tagore believed in the essential interrelatedness of all phenomena derived through his personal sense of "the infinite being" which runs through all and unites

the individual's mind with the outer world.[13] Purkayastha has pointed out that in contrast to Cartesian notion of the isolated or atomized individual, Tagore's individual is "one nucleus within a web of relationships". It is embroiled in multiple networks, blurring the lines between self-interest and duty towards others, and should be distinguished also from the liberal version of the rational, self-interested individual, or from the communitarian model of the autonomous individual whose allegiance is to community bonds (Purkayastha 2003: 59).

Tagore could indeed not conceive of the individual in terms of isolation, or dissociation of ties. One particular "doctrine" that repeatedly crops up in his writings and is derived from the Upanishadic lore states: "He who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings, he does not remain unrevealed", that is to say, "to remain confined within oneself is to extinguish oneself, but to realize oneself in others is to reveal oneself (1961h: 244).[14] Following on from this basic understanding of the individual, Tagore asserted in his not uncommon paradoxical mode that "only a perfect arrangement of interdependence gives rise to freedom" (2002f: 189). Freedom's true ambience, in other words, is interdependence and not independence and for him "the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship" (*Ibid.*: 190). Put differently, individuals and societies will grow in freedom by improving interpersonal relationships, and superiority, Tagore submitted, is with those who "have the power to cultivate understanding and co-operation" (2001: 454).

Understanding and co-operation are two essentials for taking part in a multicultural world, or rather making a success of the opportunities that come with intercultural encounters. Before I go on to explore Tagore's very practical answer to cultivating both, I wish to take recourse to Charles Taylor's essay "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition" (1992) to address, in a more theoretical manner, the difficulties inherent in the kind of intercultural dynamics that Tagore championed. (Later we will see how Tagore strove to tackle these difficulties at a practical level with his educational project.) Without wishing to suggest any close affinity between Taylor and Tagore, whose contexts and vocabularies are necessarily very different, we can detect certain overlaps in their emphases that point to a certain continuity of ideas related to ongoing problems, despite their entirely different contexts. For

[13] The most important expose of these ideas is to be found in Tagore's Hibbert lectures, delivered in Oxford in 1930 and published as *The Religion of Man* (1931). Cf. 2002f: 85-89.
[14] Or: "He alone has attained truth who has seen himself in all and all in himself", Tagore 1961e: 185.

example, the presumption of equal worth of all cultures – and Taylor problematizes this in a way Tagore does not – can be seen, at some basic level, to correspond with Tagore's celebration of cultures as potential contributors to "world humanity" or the world's storehouse of knowledge.

The premise that all cultures deserve equal respect Taylor acknowledges as a necessary, if a problematic one. The demand for recognition of cultures and acknowledgment of their equal worth lies at the heart of all freedom struggles, national, anti-colonial, or other. Indeed "withholding this presumption" of the equal value of all cultures – an anti-universalist gesture *par excellence* – would be "tantamount to a denial of equal status" (1992: 66). On the other hand, it cannot be that all cultures or all cultural products are equally valuable; granting them such recognition would involve repudiating all possible standards of judgement. The above claim can therefore only be upheld as a "presumption" the validity of which is yet to be ascertained through critical evaluation. The point is – very much also a Tagorean point – that we owe it to others and ourselves to approach all cultures in a spirit of openness, on the assumption that we may have something important to learn.

There is "an act of faith", as it were, a willing suspension of disbelief, involved in supposing that all human cultures have equally important contributions to make with respect to all human beings. In this Taylor is led to invoke the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and his religious perspective of divine providence, where cultural diversity cannot be accidental but must serve some design conducive to greater harmony (1992: 66; 72). Tagore, on the other hand, draws on the Upanishadic concept of life as the manifestation of the divine in a multitude of forms. He embeds his defence of cultural diversity in the ancient message of the One in the Many (2001a: 376).

Both Taylor and Tagore can be seen to ground the presumption of equality of cultures in a religious argument. But when it comes to advocating cross-cultural appreciation through (prolonged and serious) study of another culture, so as to ascertain the validity of this presumption, there is a more intractable problem at hand. Whose standard of evaluation are we invoking when passing judgements of worth on a culture other than our own? And whose interests do the judgements represent? As regards the latter, we should note that Taylor disputes the position derived from Foucault or Derrida that "all judgements of worth are based on standards that are ultimately imposed by and further entrench structures of power" (1992: 70).

Different standards of judgements, to state the obvious, inhere in a world consisting of different cultures, and when passing value judgements the tendency is to implicitly invoke our own standards and "cram others into our own categories", praising them when we perceive them to fit in well and denigrating them when we do not (Taylor 1992: 71). It rests on the psychological mechanism of projection (the unconscious assumption that everyone thinks the same as I do), which we have identified as underpinning false or pseudo universalism (Hogan).[15] The crucial question then is, can there be a real judgement of worth, and if so, how is it derived? Taylor suggests that there can be such a judgement, and in that sense too, his views bear out comparison with Tagore.

In the process of evaluating a culture different to our own, Taylor argues we need to consciously resist bringing our own ethnocentric standards to bear on the process. Approaching a raga, for example, "with the presumptions of value implicit in the well-tempered clavier would be forever to miss the point" (*Ibid.*). What needs to happen before a value judgement can carry any real weight is a prior revision of our own standards of evaluation. Invoking Gadamer, Taylor suggests that "real judgments of worth suppose a fused horizon of standards [...] they suppose that we have been transformed by the study of the other, so that we are not simply judging by our familiar standards (70). Our sensitivity to other cultures is indeed demonstrated through our conscious efforts to resist projective tendencies and place ourselves in the position of others. Moreover, confronted with a different set of beliefs and practices, we should ideally undertake a self-conscious revision of our own inherited beliefs. Hopefully, in the process, our ethnocentric standards are shaken and our imaginations expanded, after which we are better placed to understand values other than those associated with our own way of life, as also better equipped to pass a real judgement of worth.

Clearly, this is a highly commendable scenario, the value of which cannot be overestimated for the world of today, or for that matter the world Tagore lived in, but clearly too the demand for the effort to go deep into another culture and extend our imaginations makes it a challenging proposition. It presupposes "a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study", and a stance of humility derived from "a sense of our own limited part in the whole human story" (Taylor 1992: 73). It is an attitude that needs cultivating, since it rarely comes naturally to individuals or societies,

[15] Cf. p. 43 above.

where concerns with protecting or imposing one's own particular valuables seem to override the willingness to offer them up for a free and critical exchange.

Concerned with questions of human emancipation and creative transmission of culture, Tagore spoke of the need for "adjustment of knowledge through comparative study" and "the co-ordination of the cultures of the world". In his evocative phrasing: "[t]he seedlings that were reared within their enclosures must now be transplanted into the open fields" and "pass the test of the world-market, if their maximum value is to be obtained" (1961g: 220).[16] Whether this can be seen to link in any straightforward way with Taylor's ideal of fusing cultural horizons is of course questionable, but the openness to other cultures, the pursuit of comparative cultural study and the humility in understanding your own limited part in a bigger whole as well as willingness to position yourself in the place of others, are all central to what Tagore translated into his experiment in education. Before we go on to consider in his project in Santiniketan, I want to look at one of Tagore's more famous poems "The Golden Boat" ("*Sonar tari*") that can be seen to address some of the raised issues with great suggestiveness.

Sonar tari: letting go

Tagore wrote the poem "Sonar tari" in 1892 when he was looking after the family estates at Shelidah, by the river Padma, in north Bengal, an experience which is said to have turned him into a short-story writer.[17] This particular poem has probably generated more critical response than any other, with a controversy breaking out over its meaning and poetic merit already in his day.[18] There is indeed a lot more to the poem than its straightforward narrative would imply.

It is a rainy day in the monsoon season, the skies are rumbling with thunder, and the speaker of the poem finds himself sitting alone on the bank of the river. He had just completed gathering the harvest as it started to rain. The water is rising, there is danger of flooding, but a golden boat is spotted in the distance, with an unidentifiable, yet strangely familiar, figure at its helm.

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[16] For the same point, see also Tagore 2002c: 173-4.
[17] This interpretation has been widely accepted. For a less romantic perspective cf. Radice 1994: 1-5.
[18] For further detail see the note to the poem in Chaudhuri (ed.) 2004: 382.

Oh to what foreign land do you sail?
Come to the bank and moor your boat for a while.
Go where you want to, give where you care to,
But come to the bank a moment, show your smile –
Take away my golden paddy when you sail.

The entire harvest is loaded onto the boat, and when the vessel is ready to sail again, the speaker also wants to be taken aboard, together with his harvest. The boat however is full, and he is left behind.

On the bare river-bank, I remain alone –
What I had has gone: the golden boat took all.

(Tagore 1994: 53)

There is a definite elusive quality to this poem, despite its realistic setting, that makes textual analysis almost seem redundant. The poem was attacked in its day precisely for being supposedly vague and meaningless. Tagore of course knew how to turn an argument in his favour, and not only provided the meaning to the poem but also took a stand against overwrought grappling after meaning. "But does one write poetry to explain something? It is a feeling within the heart that tries to find outside shape in a poem. When, after listening to a poem, someone says he has not understood it, I am nonplussed. It he were to smell a flower and say the same thing, the reply would be, 'There is nothing to understand, it is only a scent'" (2003b: 270).

Nevertheless, the boat, according to Tagore's symbolic reading of "Sonar tari", stands for the World and Life – the Bengali word *samsar* conjoins the meanings of everyday domestic life and the world at large – floating along the stream of time and receiving the fruits of human labour, but not the individuals themselves. Of course, having loaded the world's boat with the harvest of our entire lives, we hope to have a place there too, so as to be remembered. The world, however, has little consideration for us. Our work survives, but we are left behind (in Tagore 2004a: 382).[19] If the golden boat can in one instance conjure up the idea of all cultures contributing their harvest to the world's storehouse of knowledge along the river of passing Time, at another we can also imagine the poem exploring the

[19] An excerpt of this letter is published in Chaudhuri's edited volume. The entire letter was translated fir me by Swati Ghosh, who also helped me appreciate some of the nuances of the Bengali original, such as the word *samsar*. The meaning of the poem is also discussed in Tagore's address to his students at Santiniketan entitled "Tori Bojhai" (a fully-loaded boat), delivered on 4th Chaitra, 1315 B.S..

relationship between the author and their work, which, once released acquires a life of its own (Tagore's English *Gitanjali* would be a case in point).

The suggestiveness of Tagore's interpretation notwithstanding, there is also a more realist side to the poem. It is located very precisely in the riverine setting of what is today East Bengal and in the peasant's anxieties over the crops. There may have been an actual incident that triggered the poem. The peasant setting and the fear for the harvest being flooded – "flood-waters twisting and swirling everywhere" – are genuine and not just metaphorical.[20] It is indeed important to see the connection between the concrete and the abstract, and see how the more philosophical dimensions of the poem are offset by its rootedness in the ordinary and the everyday, suggested by the *samsara* of life and the small plot of land on which the speaker finds himself alone (*ekkhani choto khet, ami ekela*). The unfamiliar (who is the figure at the helm, addressed with the familiar form *tumi*?) grows out of the familiar, challenging us to rediscover our selves and our everyday lives against larger historical forces.

There are lessons to be learnt from history, and Tagore, in another – this time indirect – commentary on the poem, offered further insight still: "That Alexander failed to bring the world under the banner of Greece only proves the futility of such designs; Greece's arrogant ambition has no meaning for us today [...] Greece and Rome have laden the golden boat of Time with the ripe harvests of their culture; that they themselves failed to get into the boat proved no loss, but rather lighted its load (1961c: 131). Was Greece a code word for Britain and its arrogant ambition to bring the world under its banner? And the ripe harvest what Tagore saw as invaluable – universal – in British culture? Which is what, in the final reckoning, will survive in one form or another, eventually rendering Britain's arrogant ambition meaningless?[21]

For all its layered meaning, "Sonar tari" is a sympathetic portrayal of the human condition in which separation from our worldly existence and the products of our life's toils is as inevitable as it is painful. The theme is taken up in another poem from the same collection, the poem "I Won't Let You Go", in which the refrain "I won't let you go" resounds throughout, progressively gaining in symbolic significance, from a young girl's nonnegotiable refusal to let her father go on one of

[20] For drawing my attention to the "home meaning" of the poem, which tends to be bypassed in "modern urban interpretations", I thank Ketaki Kushari Dyson. Email correspondence dated 16/07/2008.

[21] Cf. "The English ideas that our people can truly assimilate – that is the ideas that are universal rather than peculiarly English – survive while the rest decay" (Tagore 2001d: 189).

his journeys to the whole universe joining in with the poignant chorus (Tagore 2003a: 82-6). The longing and the clinging are at the heart of both poems, even as "Sonar tari" compellingly suggests the value – the necessity – precisely in letting go.

Certainly, in Tagore's philosophy, disinterested giving is the path to self-fulfilment. William Radice reads the poem as a struggle between self and soul, ending ultimately in spiritual failure. The soul is liberated only through self-surrender, but the self-interest tied to the giving of the harvest leads to loneliness and alienation – the poem's resolve (1994: 132). Our sense of self-importance, and our clamouring for immortal recognition, is, in the final analysis, the burden that deserves to be lost to history.

If we take this interpretation one step further still, "Sonar tari" can be seen as an expression of Tagore's universalist philosophy where distinct cultural products are imagined as freed of any narrow racial or cultural associations and, travelling beyond their origins, integrated into a much larger arena. The substance of this interpretation, I suggest, is borne out if we consider the aims of Tagore's educational project and further relate them to his pursuit of world travel.

Tagore was above all a poet, who would say so of himself, but alongside the twenty-five volumes of published poetry (other segments of creative writing include two thousand songs, fifteen plays, ninety short stories and eleven novels) he devoted forty years of his life to an experiment in education. The poet's becoming educator in the very practical sense tells us something about how Tagore had to translate his ideas in the world of everyday reality. As early as in 1894, he wrote in a poem, "[H]e who, submerged in self, / Turns from the world, has not learnt to live", to admonish the poet to engage with "every day's tasks", and stop playing "a tetherless truant boy"[22] – lines that no doubt reflect his own emergence from a young man's seclusion, when his father had delegated to him the responsibility of running the family estate. His subsequent work on education and development in rural Bengal certainly bears out his commitment to greater human flourishing.

We would indeed be missing a crucial component to Tagore's universalism if we excluded from the discussion his many practical initiatives and not see the link between them. These initiatives were not, as is often presumed, confined only to his class. Or, rather, when they did originate in a more circumscribed way, as was the case with the Santiniketan School when it was first founded in 1901, they soon grew

[22] "Now Turn me Back" ("*Ebar phirao more*"), in Tagore 2004: 95-9.

to overcome the initial limitations, which were arguably more practical in nature, though they were not without an ideological component (to be discussed below). Tagore's half-a-lifetime-long educational efforts, I want to suggest, were his practical answer to strengthening cooperative ties of interdependence between individuals and cultures. Put differently, they were his *post-political* answer to imperialism and isolationism.

Tagore as educator

Kathleen M. O'Connell's study, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (2002), traces the evolution of Tagore's educational experiment at Santiniketan in conjunction with the growth of Tagore's own life to show indeed a major transition from the early *brahmacharyashram* model based on the ancient Hindu forest hermitage and a master-disciple relationship, to an international university Visva-Bharati, the motto of which, *Yatra vishvam bhavatyeka nidam* (literally "where the world becomes one nest"), conveys its global and democratic ambitions. While the former was to a large extent a product of its time informed by the nineteenth-century Hindu revivalism and must be seen, as the author contends, a part of the nationalist education movement, the vision and aspirations underlying the latter moved far beyond the nationalist agenda. In fact, the first visible markers of a more universalist outlook, reflected in co-education, interaction with the rural community, commitment to non-sectarianism etc., coincided, predictably, with Tagore's disillusionment over nationalist politics. O'Connell further notes that "with the advent of World War I and Rabindranath's trips to England, America, and the Far East, the scope of his educational vision broadens further in an attempt to activate co-operation and cultural understanding between different regions of India, the Far East and the Western world (2002: 64).

When Tagore founded Visva-Bharati in 1918 at Santiniketan, the new international seat of learning (where Satyajit Ray, Indira Gandhi, and Amartya Sen would receive part of their education) was emphatically fostered in terms of a comprehensive identity. At the same time that it was to be made into "a seat of Indian cultures", it was also "to acquire an international persona" (Das Gupta 1982/3: 382). With respect to "Indian education," Tagore announced, "we shall have to collect together treasures of Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist, Jaina and Islamic minds. We shall have to find out how the Indian mind has flown along these different channels"

so as to "feel her identity in her diversity." He considered it essential to derive a perception of the Indian self in "this extended and interlinked way" (Tagore, cited in Das Gupta *Ibid.*: 83).[23]

Recognizing Indianness in such an inherently plural way and seeing cultures as nourished through a wide network of traditions – the school would also make a point in celebrating the anniversaries of religious men like Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, Chaitanya, Rammohun Roy and others – encouraged broader identifications and made it harder for people to see themselves as strictly different or separate. It also made it easier for them to relate to one another. On the practical side, Tagore introduced educational activities, such as working in the villages with Hindus, Muslims and tribals, that were specifically targeted at breaking down religious bias and caste prejudices, as well as the middle-class exclusiveness (O'Connell' 2002: 104). Personal contact unimpeded by narrow identification was certainly one way of promoting tolerance. Each student was to realize this through one's own experience. More generally, learning by doing was an important tenet of Tagore's education: "The idea", as noted by Mulk Raj Anand, "had to be an act" (1988: 84).

If the school initially set out to resurrect the wealth of Indian heritage (with the aim to instil a sense of pride and self-worth in the students), this was seen as a preliminary step for accepting other cultures and building a strong relationship with the world. Tagore understood the necessity for his students to feel grounded in their own traditions, because they would then be better equipped to truly connect with and relate to foreign ideas. Taking part in a multicultural world required a strong and mature sense of identity, so roots were important, and in Tagore's school they were nourished not least through having Bengali as the medium for learning, with English merely a taught language like Sanskrit.

Tagore wanted the Indians to capitalize on what he saw as "the great opportunity for the creation of new thought by a new combination of truths". With this in mind, he urged for "all the elements of [Indian] culture to be strengthened" so as not to "resist the culture of the West, but to accept it and assimilate it". He wanted nourishment not a burden (1961g: 222-3). Or as he put it in *Nationalism*:

> The living organism does not allow itself to grow into its food; it changes its food into its own body. And only thus can it grow strong

[23] Cf. also Tagore 1961g: 223-5.

> and not be mere accumulation, or by giving up its personal identity (2001:438).

Another reason why Tagore felt there was ultimately no need to resist what was coming from the West or elsewhere, and why he would not be intimidated into distrusting a culture because of its foreign character, is India's own past record of absorbing influences that came from the outside. Reminding the Hindu nationalists that "India's history is not the story of the Hindu alone" (1961c: 131), he pertinently spoke of the intermingling of traditions:

> In our music, our architecture, our pictorial art, our literature, the Muslims have made a permanent and precious contribution. Those who have studied the lives and writings of our medieval saints, and all the great religious movements that sprang up in the time of Muslim rule, know how deep is our debt to this foreign current that has so intimately mingled with our life (1961g: 223).

Even if Visva-Bharati never quite achieved Tagore's ambitious goal of collating the materials from the various strands of Indian traditions through the ages, it was nevertheless the first all-India university to consciously pursue a model where the non-Hindu traditions would be systematically integrated (O'Connell 2002: 176). As for the international persona of the university, the staff and students came from different parts of the subcontient as well as internationally, with subjects such as German and French being taught alongside Persian, Pali and Hindi, with Tagore himself teaching English literature and some European specialists teaching Eastern thought as well as areas of Western science and art and, of course, vice versa.[24] There is no doubt that Tagore's own travels contributed significantly to widening his aesthetic and cultural vision and were reflected in his programme for Visva-Bharati, and that in Tagore's time, and years beyond, many an interesting intellectual encounter with wider consequences emerged from the place itself. Tagore also devoted his own tours to promoting and furthering conversations between cultures. To know that Tagore's visit at the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1921 effectively led to the first showing of the original works of the European avant-garde in India a year later,[25] or that, conversely, in 1930, there was a show of Tagore's paintings at the

[24] For more on the specifics of the curricula and staff, cf. O'Connell 2002: 186-9.
[25] The exhibition was held on 23 December at the 14th annual exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta, and will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

avant-garde Galerie du Théâtre Pigalle in Paris, alongside an exhibition of African and Oceanic art, is to get a fair idea of one man's vision and his wherewithal. The enthusiasm generated by both these events moreover attests to what the art historian Partha Mitter has submitted as "the emerging [early-twentieth century] transnational discourse of global modernity" where a shared corpus of ideas on modernity was being negotiated from multiple localities across the world (2007: 65).

He also sought out individuals who would quite literally transport ideas, initially engaging his family and students to become conduits in this cultural exchange,[26] but eventually, under the aegis of Visva-Bharati, bringing together scholars to share their knowledge or expertise. Indeed, an exchange of views was paramount to education, else "no education becomes a vital part of ourselves" (Tagore 2001d: 188). He wanted moreover to bring together people pursuing similar constructive goals out of their different backgrounds, holding that at Visva-Bharati conflicting interests must be held at bay:

> We must work together in a common pursuit of truth, share together our common heritage, and realize that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind (Tagore 2002a: 171).

This is a good expression of a kind of *integral* universalism in which intellectual and artistic achievements are enjoyed as part of common, human heritage. Visva-Bharati was to become Tagore's Golden Boat, connecting distant shores and fusing mental horizons: a place where knowledge is shared, new possibilities imagined, and where creativity is given free reign not for the benefit of a particular country but for the advantage of everyone. In a letter to his son in 1916, which marks the earliest indication of his ambition to found Visva-Bharati, as noted by Dutta and Robinson, Tagore wrote the following:

> I have it in mind to make Shantiniketan the connection thread between India and the world. I have to found a world centre for the study of humanity there. The days of petty nationalism are numbered – let the

[26] His son Rathindranath, for example, was sent to America, to study for a degree in agriculture at Urbana, Illinois; for his first foreign Japanese student Hory San, who came to Santiniketan to study Sanskrit, Tagore anticipated a trip to the monasteries of Japan and China for the purpose of copying out Sanskrit texts preserved there, cf. Das Gupta 1982/3: 382-3.

> first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography – the first flag of victorious universal humanism will be planted there. (11/11/1916, Los Angeles, in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 179).

The grandiosity of diction and vision aside, it is important to take seriously what Tagore is saying here. Insofar as Santiniketan was going to be the nodal point between India and the world, it was also going to be a space "beyond the limits of nation and geography", therefore rooted but unrestricted by geo-political boundaries, open to anyone and any idea. Tagore's aim was to carve out such a creative space, believing in the power of example to inspire and foment change on an ever wider scale.

Furthermore, Tagore understood that such an experiment in education presupposed individuals with an open mind and a respectful heart to honour the universalist presumption of equal worth of all cultures (to come back to Taylor). As an educator, he therefore strove as much for cultivation of feeling as that of the intellect. His was to be education for sympathy, since the world most needed those who have "the sympathetic insight to place themselves in the position of others" (2001: 454).[27] This is yet another important aspect of Tagore's universalism, which Lalita Pandit has dubbed "empathic" (i.e. based on the principle of empathy) and pitted it against the "annihilating, nonassimilative, separatist universalism" that cannot appreciate the Other outside the already established normative self (1995: 207), but constructs it from the point of view of the hegemonic Same, the known and the familiar.

Ownership fallacy: argument for creativity

With regards the oppressive present, Tagore, as we have seen, tended to take the long view, both in the solutions that he proposed as in trying to make sense of India's difficult situation. This allowed him a certain distance and detachment, which often translated into questioning that might seem commonsensical, but would be far less obvious in conditions of colonial subjugation, or, for that matter in conditions of continuing cultural imperialism of the West:

[27] For more on the methods and strategies adopted by Tagore cf. O'Connell 2002: 105-49 (126-7); Nussbaum 2006.

> Should my joy of learning and appreciating literature stop with Bengali literature because I am born a Bengali? Have I not been born
> to the world? Are not the creations of every philosopher, every poet, every scientist as much for me as for anybody else? Should that realization not make me proud of my place in the world?" (Tagore, speech on Visva-Bharati, in Das Gupta 2004: 67)

Or:

> But a river belonging to a country is not fed by its own waters alone (Tagore 1961g: 223).

Or, to give one last, random, example:

> Even the most foolish of critics does not dare blame Shakespeare for what he openly appropriated from outside his own national inheritance. The human soul is proud of its comprehensive sensitiveness; it claims its freedom of entry everywhere when it is fully alive and awake (Tagore 2002b: 71).

In such and similar statements I read Tagore's uncompromising defence of individual creativity that admits of no artificial boundaries, and against forces of inequality and hegemony, transcends its own historical, geographical and political boundaries.

Tagore is here implicitly arguing for what, in a more recent, fresh reappraisal of the Bengal Renaissance – in an approach that helps us think beyond the terms of the colonizer/colonized binary – Subrata Dasgupta has identified as a fundamental aspect of creativity. To illustrate his argument, which in turn will help us appreciate Tagore's position, I want to briefly turn to his analysis of the much-discussed letter that Rammohun Roy sent to the Governor General Lord Amherst in 1823, in which Roy pleaded that the government funds be spent for the teaching of "the Arts and Sciences of modern Europe" rather than for the proposed lore of Indian classical languages and traditions.

For obvious reasons, this letter is often perceived as Roy's surrender to the Anglicist intellectual position, even though the Orientalist-Anglicist debate only precipitated thirteen years later, effectively a year after Roy died. This fact aside, such a conclusion, Dasgupta argues, is too easy, for it ignores two things. First, there is no reason to believe that Rammohun was any less a Sanskrit scholar, or a lover of

Islamic tradition, or an admirer of Vedanta, because he turned also to Western learning. And second, Roy's primary concern was with the Indians and not with the British (2007: 80-3). Indeed, his interest in "mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy and other useful sciences" was there for what these subjects held out with respect to "improvement of the native population", and not for their association with European or British culture (Roy 2000: 191-4).

With the passing of the English Education Act of 1835, in which the debate between the Orientalists and the Anglicists was settled in favour of Babington Macaulay's agenda to create a comprador class of Anglicised clerks adept at running the Empire, such reasoning would indeed become the official line, acquiring the malicious form of derogating everything Indian. Roy's position was unfortunately made to converge with the Anglicists, but, as Dasgupta submits, it was crucially different. "The difference lies that Roy transcended the confines of his own culture". He was merely "a consumer of Western knowledge" rather than a collaborator with the British rule (2007: 82).[28] No doubt, Macaulay's intention was to colonize the native's mind, but it would be a mistake to conflate intended with actual outcomes.[29]

But then such a view presupposes granting the colonized greater agency than the more conventional narratives of colonial encounters seem to allow for. In this respect, Dasgupta's book on the Bengal Renaissance is a welcome break from the hegemony of power discourses, as it focuses on the workings of a creative mind and its cross-cultural responsiveness. From the perspective of cognitive science, it becomes easier to reconcile the apparent contradictions in Roy's, or for that matter, Tagore's, intellectual stances. Dasgupta's explanation of the phenomenon of cross-cultural mentality and creativity – one of the key features he attributes to a host of remarkable individuals that emerged from the class most directly exposed to ideas that came with the British colonization – lays bare the mechanism of dissociating the content of knowledge from its cultural roots.

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[28] The fact that there was demand for English education on behalf of a section of the colonial elite takes the debate on English education beyond its instrumentality as a tool for exercising hegemony over the native. Though it is undeniable that English education was a crucial site for exercising supremacy over the native in cultural matters, it is important to take these proactive attitudes into account. Cf. Visvanathan 1989 and criticisms thereof: Chaudhuri 2002: 95-101; Dasgupta 2006: 87-8; Gandhi 2006: 150.

[29] Dasgupta settles this question well: "Thus, regardless of the intentions or goals of British educational policy-makers, be they Orientalists or Anglicists, the means they adopted for this purpose was to introduce Indians to English literature. Here then was a creative encounter: Indians consumed the literary works over the centuries by Englishmen; and this in turn led Indians to become producers/creators in their own right; they created for themselves a cross-cultural mentality" (2007: 89).

> [...] one's belief/knowledge space is not fragmented into regions by culture; rather it becomes an integrated, richly connected, network of beliefs, theories, facts, concepts, values. In such a situation the selection, retrieval, and processing of these entities in pursuit of a goal or need is determined solely by the goals and needs, and not by the culture-specificity of the entities. Thus, to possess a cross-cultural mentality, as Rammohun Roy did, is in part to be able to access, manipulate, and transform the content's of one's belief/knowledge space using one's repertoire of mental actions and procedural knowledge equally fluently, independent of the culture in which these contents originated. It is the goals and needs that dictate the use and processing of the beliefs and knowledge; their cultural roots become virtually transparent (*Ibid.*: 78-9).

Tagore too, whose long creative life is one big testament to such cross-cultural mentality, would, for example, claim India's right to self-government and scientific knowledge not because it was some kind of a gift from the British to the Indians, but because it was in the substance of that knowledge itself that he felt compelled to do so with respect to Indians themselves. In other words, his mind was responding to the content of knowledge rendering its alleged proprietor insignificant. The goal and need he was pursuing, not unlike his predecessor, was, he believed, the betterment of India's social, economic and political situation:

> Just as our right to European science lies in the very nature of science, so our right to English politics lies in the very nature of that politics. A small number of Englishmen might say that it would be better not to give Indian students the opportunity to learn science, but science itself would put those Englishmen to shame by inviting, in a stentorian voice, everyone, of whatever colour or creed, to grow strong by studying it. In a similar way a small, or even a large number of English politicians and journalists might say that it would be better to put all sorts of obstacles in the way of Indian self-government, but English politics would reject that advice by inviting every Indian, of whatever colour or creed, to assert his right in the government of his country (Tagore 1961f: 192-3).

This is a strong argument for entitlement and creative appropriation of ideas, when these are considered to have universal relevance. It enabled Tagore to draw on the advantages of a global modernity while remain an uncompromising critic of the colonial rule and westernization, and make, as Bhattacharya put it, modernity "ours"

without necessarily carving out a space for "our modernity" (2008: 7-8). "Why should Europe restrict to the lost the standards which she herself has formulated? Does it not bear responsibilities towards all of the world?" (Tagore 19611: 349) To shun Europe is to practise exclusivism and arrogance no different to that condemned in Europeans. It is also, Tagore believed, lacking in common sense. He understood that under colonial rule "it is not easy [...] to understand and accept what is good in Europe", but understand and accept what is "good" one must try, for where "truth" is concerned, divisions between East and West, or Europe and India, are meaningless (in Das Gupta 2004: 66).

Ideas, like people, travel, and in the process they are transformed. There are no national boundaries in the realm of knowledge, though often attitudes formed around certain ideas or subjects are based on seeing them tied to narrow territorial and political contexts. They are perceived as though they do indeed come with a national flag attached to them. This is especially true in the context of encounters that come on the back of political suppression and economic exploitation. But if beliefs and knowledge systems are considered outside their real or alleged progenitors and claimants, Tagore argued, we can relate to them simply for the "truth" of what they convey and express. Further, we can creatively adapt them to suit our own goals and needs. Ideas not only belong to everyone, but there is also nothing inherently "Eastern" or "Western" about them. Indeed, knowing that Rammohun Roy cheered the French Revolution in Calcutta at a time when in England they were strongly opposing it, seeing it only as subversive of the established ways, is to see the futility of confining ideas within territorial boundaries. Would it not be more sensible and historically accurate to see the French Enlightenment as part of the world's heritage rather than only Europe's heritage? (cf. Bhattacharya 2008: 6-8).[30]

Dynamics of truth

Tagore objected to intellectual proprietorship also because of his sense of, and devotion to, "truth", which has its locus in the individual but can only realize itself in a creative unity with others and our environment. An emphatic believer in personal contacts and the necessity of sharing across cultures, Tagore also tied his concept of

[30] The point about Roy is originally from C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*, 2004, and further cited in Sen 2005: 32.

truth to the idea of travel, both physically to foreign lands and mentally across ideational landscapes. In his address to his students in Santiniketan on the eve before his second trip to England, he spoke of the need to relate the life of their country school to the larger world:

> The power to move freely in the realm of truth is not tested until one visits other lands. The petty-souled accept the familiar as the only truth and reject all else as unimportant or unreal. The test of our devotion to truth lies in the ability to push open the doors of the unfamiliar, discover what lies behind and pay homage [...] (1961e: 160).

To claim the unfamiliar behind the doors of the familiar is a form of relativizing and contextualizing of "truth" on what can only be a continual voyage of discovery. Reality for Tagore is not based in the substance of things, but in the principle of relationship, and we can never be true in our isolated selves. So "making truth ours" involves "actively modulating its interrelations" (2002f: 132-3). Truth in that sense is both historical and contingent, and like Tagore's notion of "God", it is a "horizon concept",[31] an inspirational category that leads to overcoming of self. It is poised between the contradictory pulls of strict relativism and strict universalism, or, in Tagore's language, the finite and the Infinite. "That truth is not absolute does not mean that there is no truth; it means that *truth* continually required an up-dated contextual definition" (original emphasis, Beck 2004: 437). Indeed, living truth for Tagore is inherently dynamic, subversive of any particular creed or institutionalised belief. "In the poet's religion we find no doctrine or injunction, but rather the attitude of our entire being towards a truth which is ever to be revealed in its own endless creation" (2002c: 16).

With such dynamic concept of truth, Tagore's universalism, in my analysis, is not an established code of universal principles – though one can, as critics have done, discern ethical universals such as *ahimsa* and *love* and *sympathy* with reference to Tagore[32] – but an open-ended proposition, subject to creative transmission between cultures at a world-historical junction when "real geographical boundaries", as he put it, became but "imaginary lines of tradition" (2001: 454). In contrast also to a

[31] I borrow this notion from Pabitrakumar Roy, 2002: 197.

[32] Samir Dayal has recently strongly argued that we need "to read Tagore's universalist humanism not just as a utopic idealism but as one modeled on the universally accessible, everyday experience of love: lived affect" (2007: 180).

universalism that boasts of unity but demands uniformity, Tagore's universalism rejects uniformity but aspires for unity:

> Uniformity is not unity; only those who are different can unite. Nations which wipe out the independence of other nations are the destroyers of interdependence. Imperialist nations swallow up other nations, python-like, and they call it unity (Tagore 1961h: 246).

Tagore's is a difference-sensitive universalism, and though it strives for a whole larger than the sum of its parts, it does not necessitate a loss of individuality or erasure of cultural location. "Only by admitting the individuality of men in matters in which they are separate can we arrive at their real unity in matters in which they are one". Similarly, synthesis for Tagore "takes place only when two things remain separate and yet unite" (*Ibid.*). Differences are integral to the kind of unity Tagore stood for. His universalism not only admits plurality but is conditioned by it:

> In every man truth has a universal form and at the same time an individual form. That is his personal religion. And in that he is preserving the variety of the world. This variety is an invaluable element of creation. However much I may follow the rule of 'sameness', I can by no means blot out the difference between my form and the form of others (2006: 26).

If this can be seen as an expression of universalism of difference (i.e. we are all the same in that we are different), it is essential to understand that "difference" here is not fixed in any taxonomical manner, but is interactive, embroiled in the web of relationship with other forms. For Tagore's notion of unity is explicitly conceived as *creative*, involving a perpetual back-and-forth movement between the personal and the universal: "Our mind has faculties which are universal, but its habits are insular" (2002c: 99). This antithesis between the mind and the habits, the human potentiality and its actuality, is what sets the universalist quest into motion, in its double dialectics of self-correction and fulfilment in what Badiou, to remind ourselves of his definition of universality, has posited as becoming indifferent to difference, to whatever is conforming us.

From all that has been said regarding Tagore's universalism and many aspects to it, I find it difficult to see how Tagore can stand accused of either ahistorical imperialist universalism (Trivedi) or, more recently, from the other end, of "civilizational essentialism", by which the author, Adam Webb, means a belief

that "civilizations as a whole have drastically different essences, and that given those essences they become the building blocks of an alternative world order". In his reading of Tagore, alongside two other non-Western poets and Tagore's contemporaries, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and Liang Shuming (1893-1988), Webb is made to wonder "about the likelihood of getting to a true universalism if one devotes such energy to the affirmation of distinctiveness", admitting though that "such distinctiveness is [...] a far cry from fundamentalist chauvinism" (2008: 208).

It is true that Tagore would sometimes proceed from the distinctiveness of individual civilizations, positing that different peoples had followed different trajectories in their histories, and so understood "all particular civilizations" to be "the interpretation of particular human experience" (2001: 441). In that sense, one could argue, he posited different truths and knowledge systems for different peoples and civilizations. An awareness of such multiplicity and subsequent acknowledgement of the other's right to exist and own a separate identity is after all a fundamental premise of a true universalism. Still, Tagore was no cultural relativist, and believed that different civilizations – sometimes collapsed in his writing under the categories of "East" and "West" – were in some way complementary and had to learn from each other, for "their different outlooks on life" had given them "different aspects of truth" (2001: 423).

So, from the opposite end, Tagore would say that truth and knowledge are one and universal, and that they are variously expressed in different parts of the world – a little like, as one critic has put it, people having different diets across the globe, suited to their climate and taste, but the principle of nutrition being one (Masud 1988: 76). In both cases, however, we are dealing with the concept of "unity *in* diversity", a concept paroled in speeches and tracts so much that is has lost much of its appeal, but is nonetheless a pivot around which much of Tagore's thinking rotates. In reality, as we know, it was a distant horizon in Tagore's times as it is in our own.

There are also admittedly passages in Tagore's voluminous writings that can lend themselves to Webb's interpretation. The least attractive segments are perhaps to be found in some of his foreign lectures and addresses where he can indeed slide into essentializations of "East" and "West", to be discussed in the following chapter. Nevertheless it is important to give due recognition to both Tagore's concern for distinctive features in civilizations *and* his interest and belief in a common humanity or common human ground that underlies those features and makes conversations

across civilizations possible. For, certainly Tagore was no proponent of a clash-of-civilization theory that such a critique might erroneously suggest. Quite the opposite, he was a fervent proponent of a one-world idea. "There is only one history, the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one" (2001: 453). The new age demanded a shift in perspective, and Tagore was among the first to exhort his contemporaries across the globe "to exert [their] power of love and clarity of vision [and] make another great moral adjustment which will comprehend the whole world of men and not merely the fractional groups of nationality" (2001: 455).

At home in the world: Tagore as a "cosmopolitan"

The world vision and a passion for universalism that transcended any narrow identification as regards both individuals and ideas, Tagore pursued also through travelling, and he travelled possibly more than any other literary person in his time. After winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, he effectively crusaded the world for exchange of ideas and knowledge among cultures.

In the remaining pages of this chapter I will explore how Tagore's travels had brought alive for him some of his universalist ideals. If we accept the distinction between universalism and cosmopolitanism suggested in chapter one, namely that the former is more philosophically ambitious a term and the latter a worldlier concept, then we must also consider Tagore as a "cosmopolitan", however embattled the term is. Not suggesting any necessary or straight-forward link between cosmopolitanism and global travel, in Tagore's case, travelling – of the elite privileged kind – *was* a component of his cosmopolitanism. At a *prima facie* level, his "cosmopolitan" credentials are multiple: a multilingual individual at ease with a number of traditions, combining their features in his creative work; someone who welcomed "borrowings" as an inevitable part of an increasingly globalized world; who argued for a critical re-evaluation of received traditions vis-à-vis other traditions; and of course, someone who was widely-travelled and gave this component of his life a practical outlet and a concrete base in his institution in Santiniketan.

This would be his cosmopolitanism in the most uncomplicated sense of the term, as well as an actually existing and practised cosmopolitanism rather than a

theoretical abstraction.[33] But on a more ambitious level, Tagore's efforts were directed at what could be described as cultivating a cosmopolitan consciousness, that is to say "an awareness of the existence and equal validity of other cultures, other values, other mores" alongside "elements of self-doubt and reflexive self-distantiation" (Werbner 2006: 497-8).

We also cannot bypass the fact that Tagore had his own views regarding the trends he recognized as the shaping forces of his time and that these views have proven to be germane to contemporary debates on cosmopolitanism. "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history" is possibly *the* formulation which shows Tagore's (cultural) ideal to be poised against rootless or detached cosmopolitanism on the one hand and aggressive nationalism on the other (2001: 419). Perhaps the theoretical concept to come closest to what Tagore propagated by his own example is the rooted cosmopolitanism that Kwame Appiah had observed in his father and which he pitted against the discarded notion of cosmopolitanism as "liberalism on safari": a "parochialism [...] puffed up with universalist pretensions" (2005: 214).

A number of critics have aligned Tagore's social and political thought with a version of "new" cosmopolitanism that respects cultural difference while insisting on some fundamental set of universal values. Martha Nussbaum has endorsed Tagore's cosmopolitanism more expressly for the field of education, but her reliance on classical cosmopolitanism has provoked a heated debate (cf. 1996). It has induced Saranindranath Tagore to submit a pertinent reconstruction of Tagore's cosmopolitanism outside the abstract Kantian understanding of universality, whereby particular cultural traditions are arguably the base from which to understand and morally relate to others. The "thicker version of cosmopolitanism" that he attributes to Tagore is one able "to accommodate the weight of tradition" and can be arguably "made consistent with a bounded conception of reason" rather than the notion of universal reason as something detached and independent of all traditions (S. Tagore 2008: 1072; 1074). Effectively, Tagore, in Saranindranath's reading, becomes a new cosmopolitan of the recent debates.[34] The very link between Tagore's social and

[33] Part of the recent revising of cosmopolitanism turns on the pragmatic question of what cosmopolitans do rather than what cosmopolitanism is, taking the focus away from philosophical conceptualizations to actually existing cosmopolitanisms. Cf. Malcomson 1998; Robbins 1998; and with regards to South Asian cosmopolitan practices, cf. Pollock 2000.

[34] See here Nussbaum's assessment of Tagore's credentials as a democratic thinker in *The Clash Within* (2007: 82-94). Here, speaking of Tagore's position as an individualist *and* humanist, she comes closer to Saranindranath's position: "Humanism might lead to colorless cosmopolitanism; but

political thought and new cosmopolitanism has recently also been argued for by Louise Blakeney Williams, but her emphasis on the "nationalist" dimension of Tagore's cosmopolitanism, in my view, runs the risk of limiting the scope of Tagore's ideas (cf. Williams 2007).

In contrast to these strict theoretical analyses of cosmopolitanism, I want to consider how Tagore's personal experience of different peoples and different cultures has led him to understand that over and above the "organized humanity of nations" there is "no difficulty in accepting the natural man as one's own". Seeing and recognizing reality also in human beings outside his own environment and beyond instrumentality of power has made him experience closeness across cultural and geographic divides, and this closeness, Tagore found, was largely reciprocated. It was indeed possible to come into touch with, in his evocative if elusive language, "the Eternal Man amongst unknown humanity in a foreign country" (Tagore EW 3: 659). Was this then the source that fed his optimism about the potential of global understanding?

Tagore's first trip to the Himalayas with his father as a boy of eleven – effectively the first time "the blue of the horizon" displaced the intimidating ring drawn around him by the servant rule of his household – was, as deducible from his own account of the experience, the formative experience that awoke in him "the hunger to see properly" and test reality against preconceived notions. It compelled him to travel to distant places, but it was also relevant for his home environment (Tagore 2003b: 100). "In the streets of Calcutta", he wrote, "I sometimes imagine myself a foreigner, and only then do I discover how much is to be seen". Challenging himself to "see properly" against the tensions of not-belonging which never fall neatly between "home" and "the world", particularly under colonial conditions, became Tagore's lifelong maxim. That the "charming portrait of the cowherd boy" gleaned from stories he had read or heard found no obvious correlative in the real world was food for thought for the young and searching mind (*Ibid.*: 112).

The more consequential hiatus between the real and imagined, however, was experienced years later on his first foreign trip to England. It was then that Tagore's anticipated England "so devoted to higher culture" that it would "resound with the strains of Tennyson's lyre [and] Gladstone's oratory, Max Müller's exegesis and Carlyle's deep reflections" came up patently short of the real England of men going

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if it respected the individual it would move instead in the direction of tactful and sympathetic pluralism" (90).

about their work and women attending to their appearance (1991: 40). The many months' of continued exposure to the social and family life in the colonial metropolis, however, did much to temper his initial disappointment. The caustic commentary of the English ways, evidenced in the body of letters he sent home from this particular trip,[35] gave way to a more considered appreciation of differences and similarities that existed between the two cultures. Superb descriptions of differences in habit and custom, such as the spittoon vs. handkerchief discussion, in which different codes of cleanliness are seen to dictate the use of spittoon in one culture and the use of a handkerchief in another, go hand in hand with more general reflections on human nature.

Particularly with respect to women his response can be seen to transform from seeing English girls "as an entirely different species", quite irritating in their perceived affectations and supreme concern with appearances, to, as the poet's biographer Kripalani noted, genuine admiration for the strength of character of women in a society that allowed them greater freedom to express their individuality (2001: 41). When Tagore came to lodge under the roof of a Dr Scott in London, he was fortunate in that he was made to feel part of the family, forming close attachments with all its members, including the four daughters (cf. Tagore 2003b: 197-201). It was in this setting that he wrote, closing, at some level, the cultural gap: "One thing struck me when living in this family: human nature is everywhere the same" (*Ibid.*: 198).

This fundamental recognition of sameness, distrusted for obvious reasons by cultural relativists, must be, in Tagore's case, properly understood as an assertion intended to secure respect for real differences rather than undermine it. Connotative rather than denotative; a presupposition, and not a prescription, it allows for seeing "the Other" as an integral and therefore relevant part of ourselves and humanity-at-large, from whom we may have yet something to learn, or not. In other words, the oneness of human nature that was revealed to him through contact with persons from cultures other than his own strengthened his cosmopolitan conviction that conversation between strangers, to paraphrase Appiah, is indeed possible, as it is also necessary.

Particularly as Tagore became an international figure, he became somewhat of an "ideologue" of world unity. He believed that "intense consciousness of

[35] Entitled *Europe Prabasir* Patra, this document inaugurated the colloquial form of Bengali (*chalit bhasha*) into creative writing as opposed to the more formal *shadhu bhasha* current at the time.

separateness of one's own people from others [...] inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts", and therefore privileged "consciousness of unity" over "consciousness of separateness" (in Bhattacharya 2005: 61). In this he was responding to the divisive politics of his time, no doubt exaggerating the unity aspect of India's history to counteract the worrying Hindu-Muslim sectarianism and the separatist tendencies emerging in some provinces, but supporting his avowal to the idea of unity there was undeniably his rich personal experience of alterity.

We only need to go to his travel writings to get a sense of his curiosity about other people and ability to relate to them.[36] A keen and sympathetic observer, Tagore can be said to give in this critically still underappreciated genre of his writings (cf. Haq 2005) ample expression to what Ulrich Beck has submitted as the badge of *realistic* cosmopolitanism, namely "[a]n affirmation of the other as both different and the same" (2004: 10). One example springs to mind when the poet visited a Bedouin camp on his travels in Iraq and Persia in 1932. As he was sat down to break bread together with his hosts, he pondered how "contrasting the two races, the Beduins and the Bengalis, are" and how differently they have been moulded by their environments, the nurturing riverine landscape and the harsh deserts respectively, the latter starkly challenging the everyday existence of Beduins. The act of sharing "the same piece of large and coarse bread" Tagore saw as reflective of the strong bonds of kinship that exist within a Beduin tribe and a symbolic gesture of "their readiness to give their lives for the community". And, yet, despite the fact that "our hosts and we are of two totally different moulds", it struck Tagore, that here too, as elsewhere, where he was not made conscious of belonging to a different nation or different religion, he found proof of the universality of "the language that carries the message of the most profound humanity" (2003: 110-11).

While Tagore's vision was premised on a belief in a spiritual unity of humanity, having at its core an ideal of freedom that promoted individual self-expression and development and hence diverse ways of being, it was committed to honouring difference. Not to belabour an earlier point, unity for Tagore does not issue in uniformity. "It is God's purpose", he held, "that in the societies of man the various should be strung together into a garland of unity", only to understand how trod-upon this ideal is in practice. Indeed, aggressive promotion of similitude across

[36] Of the seven existing travel narratives, three are now available in English translastion. Cf. Tagore 1962; 2003; 2008a. For more on this, cf. Haq 2005.

cultures Tagore recognized to be a dominant, if, in his view, ultimately futile, trend in history:

> Repeated efforts, even unto violence and bloodshed, have been made, all the world over, to bring mankind together on the basis of the common worship of a common Deity, but even these have not been successful. Neither has a common God been found, nor a common form of worship (in Bhattacharya 2005: 105).

One-size-fit-all solutions are not only hegemonic, they are also too simplistic. It was this belief that lay at the core of Tagore's disagreement with Gandhi's injunction that all Indians should devote some of their time to spinning, or burn foreign cloth, as the solution to India's problems.[37] To those who asked with the same objective of *swaraj*, "Would not the foreigners be drowned even if every one of our three hundred and thirty millions were only to spit at them?" Tagore submitted that no doubt the prospect was fearsome, but "you can never get all these millions even to spit in unison. It is too simple for human beings" (*Ibid.*: 109). Complex problems demand complex solutions, and people should be helped and encouraged to employ their whole energy in their own line of work rather than be made to follow a *charka* injunction, however well intended (*Ibid.*: 118). Tagore's principal concern was with guarding the integrity of personal action and freedom, so it is not surprising that he often found himself disagreeing with Gandhi's operative political approach (cf. Bhattacharya 2005: 26-7).

Their opinions seriously diverged on issues concerning non-cooperation and the role of science and technology in modern life, but to see their views in terms of strict opposition would be to simplify their intellectual confrontation. Notwithstanding real differences in opinion and approach, there was much by way of common ground between them, in orientation (opposition to casteism, communalism) as well as enterprise, such as "building educational institutions outside the state-sponsored system in the colonial mould" (*Ibid.*: 33). It is telling that Tagore, at the end of his life, concerned with what would happen to Visva-Bharati after he died, nominated Gandhi as a life trustee (cf. *Ibid.*: 161-7). The intensity of their exchange over a period of twenty-five years (and both responded positively to each other's criticism) may also have brought them closer on certain points; Bhattacharya has suggested that Gandhi may have begun to see India's relationship

[37] For the *charkha* controversy, cf. the correspondence between Tagore and Gandhi, in Bhattacharya 2005: 99-128.

to the world differently as a result of the debates he had with Tagore. His striking pronouncement, "I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any" (*Ibid.*: 36), could very well have been Tagore's. For example: "The true universalism is not the breaking down of the walls of one's own house, but the offering of hospitality to one's guests and neighbours" (Tagore 2002b: 75).

On other points, however, such as the Bihar earthquake in 1934 (Gandhi put the calamity down to God's punishment for the sin of untouchability, but Tagore could not accept such an unscientific view of the world), Gandhi was intractable, and Tagore in turn accepted "the eternal human truth that we are in agreement with some people and with some others we are not" (*Ibid.*: 99).

Tagore's rapport with Gandhi, to explain the short digression, demonstrates something of what true cosmopolitan stance requires: the respect for another's point of view, the willingness to learn from it and challenge one's belief system; and, finally, a measure of humility in knowing that your view, no matter how passionate your convictions may be, is but *a* view. Both being Indian, they had arguably much by way of common ground and purpose, but one should not forget that cultures are more internally plural than nationalist ideologues would have us believe, and differences we tend to associate with experience across cultures apply as much to experience of alterity within cultures. Effectively one can be a cosmopolitan without necessarily stepping outside the home base.[38]

So part of what it means to be truly cosmopolitan is to understand that our own perspectives are necessarily limited, provisional and, as Tagore hoped, subject to revision in the face of new evidence or experience. "Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house" (Tagore, in Bhattacharya 2005: 61).[39] In the final analysis, the idea(l) of the unity of humanity that is at the heart of Tagore's universalist/cosmopolitan vision is a locus of intersecting traditions and histories that suggests open-ended possibilities for personal and collective transformation (cf. S. Tagore 2008: 1080).

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[38] For a challenge to cultures being tied to specific locales, and proposition that they be seen as "travel" or a product of "the wider world of intercultural import-export" (100) cf., most famously, Clifford 1992.

[39] Against the long history of cosmopolitan arrogance, Malcomson evokes a new cosmopolitanism of humility, suggesting that the non-Western world has much to offer here. Cf. 1998: 241.

With respect to artistic transformation, Tagore held: "A current trend in Asian countries is to attempt a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, and this fusion is pregnant with possibilities." Part of his confidence and optimism must again be put down to his belief in universal humanity that transcends asymmetrical power relations, but Tagore's resources as a thinker were also ever of the pragmatist: "We have seen the influence of eastern art on European paintings, but that has not spelt doom for the western art and culture," so how, he asked, would rejecting Europe "necessarily reinforce the glory of our heritage" (Tagore, in Bhattacharya 2005: 83; 85).

In his assessment of Tagore's travel writings, Kaiser Haq remarks on one aspect of Tagore's personality which comes across as a positive influence in his writings about the world, namely that he was free of the "cultural cringe" and the "*ressentiment*" associated with colonial relations (2005: 369). There is indeed little, if anything, in his writings that would suggest a colonial mentality that is dismissive of one's own culture, or, conversely, defensively asserts the unique merits of a "national" culture. Tagore proposes instead a twin scrutiny of the old and the new, the homegrown and the foreign, so as to derive a higher level of understanding surpassing both. Hence he could be, at one and the same time, the severest critic and admirer of the West, and the severest critic and admirer of India. "In no country in the world is the building up of *swaraj* completed" (Tagore, in Bhattacharya 2005: 82).

As the-early-twentieth-century India, fighting colonialism, underwent a transformation from what Sheldon Pollock has termed "the culture of Place, *deshi*" to *Swadeshi,* "our own place", that is, "national", Tagore, his initial involvement in nationalist politics notwithstanding, tried to dissuade his countrymen, going against the political barometer, from adopting the prefix. The alternative Tagore envisioned and strove for was emphatically *deshi* in its dynamic relationship to the world. He located resources for a new mode of belonging in what became the place of his foremost attachment. His own creation, as it were, Santiniketan was to bear out his personal conviction that opposes the patriotic "idea that our homeland is ours just because we have been born in it" and replaces it with a creative principle in which "whatever country [man] helps to create by his wisdom and will, devotion and action, becomes his real homeland" (1961j: 255).

Predictably then, Santiniketan was explicitly conceived as "somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography", to return to the letter he sent his son and

from which we cited earlier, where a richer and more all-encompassing understanding of "humanity" was aspired to from within one's own vernacular and cosmopolitan traditions in interaction with other traditions. Is it then, as Pollock would have it, not possible to be particular *and* universal without being national?

From a more critical perspective on cosmopolitanism, one is wont to ask whether Tagore sufficiently problematized people's access to varied cultural experiences and their readiness to embrace other cultures; whether he sufficiently distinguished between intercultural contacts that are voluntary, enabled by favourable conditions to travel and "fuse horizons", and those that are imposed, as in the conditions of colonial rule (cf. Bharucha 2006: 118). These questions are not easy to answer.

Amit Chaudhuri has recently suggested that the answer to the "confidence and magpie-like instinct towards intellectual entitlement" that Tagore, in many ways, personifies – what in his view, gives a distinctive mark to Indian modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century – need not be seen as merely a province of class elitism, but also recognized as an expression of the ability to translate "the self from [the fixed identity of] colonial subject to 'universal' human being". The notion of "Indianness" that thus emerged was doubly predicated on a national and therefore oppositional identity (i.e. being Indian as opposed to being British) and, at the same time, a "universal human" identity, i.e. being at one with "the Other" and therefore receptive and open-ended (2008: 106). This, then, is the more imaginative strand of anti-colonial modernity that, as Bose and Jalal argue, aspired to be both different *and* universal (2003: 107).[40]

In this chapter I have tried to highlight Tagore's positive and creative attitude towards the problems of his time. I have attempted to link Tagore's universalist perspective with concrete achievements, taking into account both his poetry and educational work, showing how it has informed both. Tagore's ideas sought fulfilment in a wide range of activities, in close alliance and sympathy with a great diversity of persons outside the confines of his class, nationality, and religion. As a member of a high-profiled landed aristocratic family whose early fortunes were closely tied to the economic opportunities associated with the arrival of East India Company, Tagore indeed had the privilege to engage with diverse systems of

[40] Cf. p. 27 above.

knowledge, but this, as is often suggested, cannot detract from the validity of his thinking.

Critically and self-consciously, he strove to distinguish between "tradition and mere convention", motivated alongside by an increasingly strong sense that "the world was there to be assimilated" (Bose 1994: 29). The latter put him in a subversive relationship with the persisting binaries of tradition and modernity, split allegedly between "us" and "them", suggesting instead a notion of global or universal modernity sustained through travel and exchange of ideas. For Tagore "true modernism" was "freedom of mind, not slavery of taste"; it was "independence of thought and action" (2001: 446). This freedom he claimed for himself (over and above the fact of colonization) and tried to extend to others.

When he was able to acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as his own, he wrote to his close associate in Santiniketan, C. F. Andrews, he was proud of his humanity. "Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have had their origin" (13/03/1921, in Andrews ed. 2002: 107). This statement encapsulates Tagore's insistence on setting ideas free in the face of historical forces that threatened to partition the world of ideas as much as they partitioned the world of people.

4. TAGORE IN THE WEST: DIVERSE RESPONSES

> After gaining some strength I wish to sail for Europe. I do not know when exactly I can make it. I have done as much as I could have for this country. Whether the country accepts it or not, there hasn't been any dearth of interest on my part. People across the sea want me now – I have my place there among them. Which is my true homeland? The piece of land where I was born by accident?
>
> (Tagore, 1912?, Letter to Monoranjan Bandyopadhyay)

Tagore, as already noted, was an exceptionally widely-travelled man, and this long before intercontinental travel became commonplace. Effectively, he spent more than a tenth of his lengthy life, close to nine years, touring abroad. From the time of his first foreign trip to England in 1878-9 as a young man of seventeen, sent there to acquire the qualifications deemed fit for his class (he returned to India without completing any formal education), and his last foreign tour to Persia and Iraq in 1932 at the age of 71, he undertook as many as twelve world tours. Some kept him away from Calcutta and Santiniketan for over a year. Multiple times in Europe, North America, the Middle East, the Far East, once to South-East Asia and South America – Tagore visited every inhabited continent except for Australia and, perhaps more unexpectedly, Africa (discounting a short stay in Alexandria and Cairo on his return trip in 1926).

It is not surprising then that travelling features so prominently in his thought as well as writing, and in the previous chapter we have explored the value the poet attributed to it with respect to what became the ideal enshrined in Visva-Bharati's constitution: "To study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view" (in Das Gupta 2004: 69). We have also linked it with Tagore's emphasis on interdependence and cooperation as forces that needed strengthening to fend against the identity politics of nationalism and imperialism. This chapter further considers Tagore's compulsion to travel (even before the Nobel Prize), with attention to his endorsement of the English language through which his

poetry and ideas could be disseminated. This will lead us to explore his reputation in the West, more precisely, in Europe, after he became a world celebrity. His European reputation and fame was not a monolith, a point made clearer as we move away from the metropolitan centres of Western Europe to consider some specific responses to the Indian poet from Europe's Central and Eastern peripheries. I highlight the idenfitication paradigm as one specific mode of response to Tagore that can help us frame not only the general Slovenian response to the Indian poet, but also the particulars of Kosovel's personal appreciation of the Indian poet.

Purposeful traveller

In his letters, Tagore often expresses a craving for the "wide world", the need to distance himself from his own society, and embark on some new journey. Or as he put it in a letter to Edward Thompson: "For some time past I have been feeling restless. It is the migratory instinct in me. I have a nesting place on the other side of the sea and I feel homesick for the wide world" (13/04/1916, in Das Gupta ed. 2003: 108). Sometimes he questions the whole notion of "home" and belonging, entertaining possibilities of new and other "homes". In the previous chapter I have suggested a close link between his critique of nationalist and patriotic discourses and his deterritorialized concept of India. His educational project too was envisioned emphatically as a place transcending national and geographic boundaries. And yet, in the final reckoning, Tagore was and remained very much *rooted*, perhaps not to India as a geographical fact – though ultimately he always returned to Santiniketan, and it is hard to imagine Tagore wanting to settle down permanently anywhere else but in Santiniketan – but certainly in his commitment to "India", the motivating force behind all his projects.

Tagore's "migratory instinct" that drove him to travel was no doubt enhanced by his cosmopolitan upbringing, as well as the peculiar circumstances the poet found himself in after the short and abortive stint in the nationalist politics. "Having abandoned the struggle which he had so heroically inspired", Tagore, by then already a celebrity in Bengal, found himself intellectually and emotionally isolated in the midst of his own people (Kripalani 2001: 112). Between 1902 and 1907 he suffered a series of tragic bereavements, losing four members of his close family (his wife, his

second daughter, his father and his youngest son). In the best years of his life he was, to quote his biographer, "reduced to utter loneliness" (*Ibid.*: 114).[1]

Though on the romantic front he remained a single man till the end of his life,[2] he sought intellectual companionship elsewhere, inspired to meet people who like himself fought "the bondage of nationalism". One such person was the French writer in exile Romain Rolland (1866-1944), "an outcast from his own people" according to Tagore, who had been made to "renounce [his] home-world" in the "true spirit of a *sannyasin*" (in Bhattacharya 2005: 86).[3] But unlike Rolland, who as a foresworn pacifist went into self-imposed exile in Switzerland after WWI broke out and remained there until 1938, Tagore always returned to India, bringing back, as it were, the boons of his travels. Indeed, once he became sought out by agencies across the world competing to exploit his cultural capital, Tagore in turn made use of the financial gains "to support his school in Santiniketan, and in sustaining experiments in agriculture, community development, and banking in Sriniketan" (Bharucha 2006: 125). One can imagine the indispensability of such a financial injection for a school that was not state-funded, and as a self-funded institution, did not collect fees, at least not in the early years.[4]

Privileged globe-trotter that Tagore unquestionably was, he was not a casual traveller. Adopting for himself the role of a mediator between cultures, he shouldered the task in larger-than-life terms of a *mission*, a *calling*, or a *pilgrimage*, to give some of the recurring metaphors he employs in his writings to describe his adopted role. For Tagore, as we have seen, travelling had to connect distant banks, and that required leaving "mental easy-chairs" behind and letting go of excessive attachments to "home comforts", intellectual or otherwise (Tagore 2002c: 88-9).

Tagore's English career

Alongside the vast advances in communication technology and the spread of the print media, the global character of modernity was enabled through the colonial elites' mastery and adoption of languages, such as English, French and Spanish that

[1] It is against this history of suffering, loss and great loneliness that Tagore's *Gitanjali* emerged and should be read, a history that did not get communicated through to the Western audiences, according to Dutta-Roy (2001: 61-66).
[2] For his relationship with Victoria O'Campo, cf. Dyson 1996.
[3] For more on the encounter between Rolland and Tagore, cf. Aronson and Kripalani eds. 1945.
[4] Tagore's royalties, though incomparably larger than that of any of his contemporaries, were not enough to support a substantial institution. Cf. Kaviraj on this in the context of the professionalization of literature in nineteenth-century Bengal, 2003: 551-5.

were instrumental as vehicles for the transaction of influences. What then must be considered as part of Tagore's complex relationship with the world is his relationship with English. More precisely, why did he feel the need to endorse and translate himself into the colonizer's tongue?

In chapter two we looked at the complex linguistic map of colonial Bengal to appreciate the multilingual context of the Bengali society and the impact of English on the existing linguistic practices. Although English in India to this day operates as a divisive marker of power, prestige and social mobility, to reduce its impact merely to that of a cultural conquest would be to simplify matters, in the same way that it would be to portray the cultural impact of colonialism as exclusively coercive. The Tagores, as we saw, stood firm on the question of Bangla, but English was endorsed as the language that enabled a wider circulation of ideas and communication both within and outside India (Tagore and Gandhi conducted their communication in English for lack of any other shared language).

This brings us to the question of Tagore's *reaching out* to the metropolitan cultural site through translating his own work so as to make himself know as a poet in the West. Recent scholarship has treated this subject more critically, dispelling some of the assumptions regarding Tagore's sudden eruption into fame in the colonial metropolis to which the poet himself may have lent an authorial voice.[5] As Bikash Chakravaty has argued, Tagore did not embark the ship at Bombay on 27 May, 1912, "only out of a romantic urge for the beyond [. . .] but also with a definite sense of purpose" (Chakravarty 1998: 12). Certainly, Tagore's sense of purpose to reach beyond India for intellectual companionship predates his success as a world-renowned literary figure and is central to his philosophy, but Chakravarty more specifically sees Tagore craving an English-speaking audience.

By tracing what he calls Tagore's "English career" to as far back as 1890s, when the poet first tried his hand at translating one of his own poems into English, and following it through a number of fitful starts until its unexpected culmination in the Nobel prize-winning collection *Gitanjali*, Chakravarty highlights a history to the promotion of Tagore's poetry in England that, he argues, tends to be missing in the conventional accounts of the poet's abrupt rise to fame; a history that Sisir Kumar Das has also identified as being "the culmination of long and intermittent efforts to present his poetic world to a foreign audience" (*Ibid.*: 1-12; Das 1994: 20-1). But

[5] See Tagore's letter to his niece Indira Devi, dated May 6, 1913, in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 117-8. For commentary on it, cf. Dutt 2001.

while Chakravarty, noting the efforts of Tagore's devoted friends and associates to assist him on his mission, lays a lot of emphasis on Tagore's sense of purpose, Das's reading, on the other hand, shows Tagore to have been initially quite detached from the efforts of his admirers in India (and in England) to translate and present his work, and it was only in response to increasing demands for translations of his work by these admirers, and being dissatisfied with the existing translations, that he took charge of translation himself (2004: 10-16). Either way, it seems reasonable to suggest that when Tagore decided to write or translate himself into English – and the predicament is one faced by (post-)colonial writers – "he did so because he wanted to put across his ideas on a metropolitan plane". Tagore was indeed after an "international fraternity of ideas and ideals wholly opposed to provincialism or regional interests" (Chakravarty 1998: 19). To this end, as Chakravarty aptly submits, Tagore's manner of translation, by now widely criticized for diluting the poetic substance of the originals, was motivated less by linguistic considerations than governed by the perceived need to convey ideas and establish rapport on the level of idea(l)s. That this contributed to the decline of his reputation as a poet in the West is now widely accepted and was also understood by Tagore himself.[6]

The immense variety of both style and language were apparently lost in translation, making it hard for non-Bengali speakers, as one critic has noted, "to recreate the rich, vibrant and tragic background of the deeply religious *Gitanjali*" (Dutta-Roy 2001: 62); or appreciate the power of poetic mind that rests on the concerted working together of "verse-form, rhythm, structure, language, feeling, imagery, moral depth, wit" that makes for a great poet that Tagore undoubtedly was in Bengali (Radice 2003a).[7] But if Tagore is to be blamed for presenting himself to the West in less than adequate English translations of his Bengali originals, particularly in his post-Gitanjali publications, it is also a fact, as noted by Dyson, that "there was no one in the English speaking world competent enough to translate this great poet from the original language". Indeed, colonial conditions after Macaulay's minutes on education that gave supremacy to the English language over Indian languages were not favourable for creating such individuals (Dyson 2003: 34-5).

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[6] Most candidly in a letter to Edward Thompson, dated February 2, 1921, Tagore wrote: "In my translations I timidly avoid all difficulties, which has the effect of making them smooth and thin. I know I am misrepresenting myself as a poet to the western readers" (Das Gupta ed. 2003: 128). For more on Tagore's translations, cf. Mukherjee 1981; Das 1986.

[7] Cf. also Dutt 2001 for a close analysis of how Tagore translated out the sensual imagery from his Bengali songs, rooted in the erotic imagery of Vaishnava poetry, to pander to the perceived Euro-American sensibilities informed by Chrisitan morality.

It must be said at this point however that, aside from other cultural and political factors, the impact of Tagore's translations on his reputation in the English-speaking world did not necessarily suffer parallel fortunes in other parts of Europe and the world. In Spanish, French or Slovenian, for instance, Tagore translations, though twice removed from the original, may have paradoxically functioned better than in English, where the adopted forms of "thou" and "thee" gave the poems an antiquated air alien both to the original Bengali and contemporary poetry being written in English. They were also done by first-rate poets, Jiménez, Gide and Gradnik respectively.

For all Tagore's intentions to be known in the West, it must finally be noted, he never tried to re-create himself into an English author, though he adopted the language for his foreign addresses and lectures tours, effectively turning himself into a bilingual writer.[8] But as far as literature was concerned, for Tagore, the natural or adequate medium for creative expression remained Bengali (cf. Das 1994: 16).[9] Unlike some of his predecessors, for example Michael Madhusudan Dutt, or Bankimchandra Chatterji, who started out as writers in English and then switched to Bengali, he was never seduced into the dilemma of linguistic choice that confronts a writer under colonial domination.

He was however, it seems, drawn into what Tim Brennan has more categorically assigned to the "Third World Cosmopolitan celebrities", namely into "fulfilling the paradoxical expectations of a metropolitan public" (1989: 9). Any discussion of Tagore's reputation in the West is necessarily complicated by his conscious or subconscious pandering to the metropolitan site which invariably "produces the power to legislate, to legitimate and to authorize a cultural product" (Chakravarty 1998: 4). The dubious Western identity he came to acquire in the process was at least partially the outcome of his own eagerness, as Somjit Dutt unsparingly put it, "to win the favour of a newly appointed headmaster who knows nothing about his students' background and abilities" (Dutt 2001). Tagore was shrewd enough to understand that he needed validation from the West to make his position stronger at home.

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[8] The editor of Tagore's three volumes of English writings, Sisir Kumar Das, highlights the importance of Tagore's original English writings, noting their relevance for a fuller understanding of the writer, but observes that within Bengal, they tend not to be taken seriously (1994: 26-7).

[9] This position on language was challenged by subsequent generations of Indian writers who made English their primary vehicle of expression, spanning the generation of novelists that came into prominence in the 1930s (R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao) and culminating in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981).

As for the earlier comparison with Brennans's class of cosmopolitan intellectuals – the elite globetrotters who express doubts over rooted modes of belonging and seek shelter in the suggestive but elusive construct of "the world" from their privileged positions of "in-betweenness", often making a virtue of their dual heritage that is an accident of colonial history (Brennan 1989) – this comparison does not hold beyond the fact that Tagore was "the first global superstar or celebrity in literature" (Chaudhuri 2001: xviii) and, in that sense, their precursor.[10] On the question of both language and domicile, Tagore remained bound to his native background, even though his migratory instinct made him constantly reach beyond his grassroots selfhood to acquire a fuller identity.

The Nobel prize and after

It was Tagore's third visit to England in 1912 that paved the way for his receiving the highest honour in the world of letters. When Tagore arrived in England this time, he came with an exercise-book filled with his own translations of some of his poems and songs. He showed them to the English painter William Rothenstein, who, impressed by what he read, sent the manuscript to W. B. Yeats. Before the year was out, a slim volume of one hundred and three poems edited and enthusiastically introduced by the Irish poet was first published by the India Society of London only to be soon taken up by Macmillan in a larger edition.

Entitled *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings*, the book created a huge sensation and was reprinted as many as thirteen times within a year. For a time, Tagore became the attraction of the Anglo-American literary elite, including Ezra Pound and Ernest Rhys. In November 1913, through the efforts and orchestration of his supporters, most notably Yeats, Pound and Sturge Moore, he became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.[11] What followed was an unprecedented response to any poet in the history of letters. Alex Aronson gives an idea:

> Wherever he went, he was received with the same unbounded almost delirious enthusiasm. His picture was flashed across continents and oceans. He travelled in the special trains put at his disposal by the Fascist Government of Italy and went to Russia on a special

[10] Brennan is taking on the post- Rushdie generation of writers, most of whom live in the West and write in the erstwhile colonizers' languages.
[11] For further detail, cf. Chakravarty 1998, Foster 1998: 465 ff. For more on Tagore and the Nobel Prize, cf. Radice 2003b.

> invitation of the Soviet Government; he was the guest of presidents of democratic republics, of kings, both before and after their abdication, of the greatest men of letters and science [among them Roman Rolland, André Gide, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Mann, Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg]. We see him speaking to audiences of many thousands, and to millions through the radio. His portrait has been painted by several hundred artists, his bust could be seen in almost all the exhibitions of the outstanding sculptors of the world. Yet, wherever he went, he wanted to see the children; perhaps he felt, they were the ones who understood him (1978: vii).

Many interrelated factors came into play as various countries, groups and individuals responded to Tagore, each in their own way, even as they drew on the common stock of perceptions that guided Western imagination as regards the East in the early decades of the twentieth century.[12] Often his reputation could not be sustained, complicated as it was by false and narrow expectations, changing literary trends, and weak translations. Particularly in the Anglo-American world, the tremendous enthusiasm with which the "mystic from the East" was initially received soon deteriorated into disappointment and rejection. Amit Chaudhuri, for example, finds it shocking that "respectable people like Yeats and Pound" lost their regard for Tagore's work so quickly, and that as a result Tagore's reputation was seriously damaged in the English-speaking West (2002: xviii).[13]

The extraordinary impact Tagore had on the minds of literary men and women as well as the sheer sensationalism surrounding the poet can be partly explained away circumstantially (and Aronson's study validates this). Broadly speaking, the West at the turn of the century was once again in need of a spiritual injection from the East.[14] The following lines from Srečko Kosovel capture some of the atmosphere of disillusionment and spiritual bankruptcy after the events of World War I:

> A tired European
> stares sadly into a golden evening
> even sadder
> than his soul.
> [...]

[12] For Tagore's reception in America, cf. Hay 1962; in Germany Kämpchen 1991; in Central Europe (particularly Hungary) Bangha 2008. For more on East-and-West encounter, cf. Ivbulis 1999.

[13] For a critical reading of Yeats's introduction and his role in initiating the Orientalist myth of Tagore-the-prophet, which set the tone for the falsified mainstream Western image of the Bengali poet, cf. Jelnikar 2008.

[14] "There is a game that the West plays with men from the East: first, craving gurus, then criticising them for preaching like gurus", Dyson 2003: 30.

A civilization without heart.
A heart without civilization.
An exhausting struggle.
An evacuation of souls.
[...]
(1925?, "Kons", in Kosovel 2008: 100)

Exhausted from what another European poet would call a "filthy modern tide",[15] people in the West were ready for "a book of the soul" in which "life is the visible expression of the eternal", to quote one enthusiastic reviewer of *Gitanjali*.[16] Branded, predictably, a Wise Man from the East, its author was seen to be representative of Indian civilization itself; his was the quintessentially Indian voice (Lago 1972: 5). It must be conceded, with his white beard and long-flowing robes, he fitted the part well. Nirad C. Chaudhuri's tongue-in-cheek remark may well have been right: "After the decline of [Tagore's] literary reputation his looks remained his greatest asset as a prophet in the West" (1987: 630).

I would agree with Bharucha, however, that as far as Tagore's appearance is concerned, easily translatable though it was for an uninformed observer into a marker of Indianness, it had little to do with Tagore's choreographing for a Western audience. His striking outfit conjoining a Hindu-Muslim dress through the wearing of the *chapkan*, a loose overcoat on top of a *jubba* (tunic), was an expression of, according to Bharucha, "a deeply personal introspection, in direct response to the politics of culture at home". In contrast to Gandhi's politics of khadi to affirm swadeshi politics, Tagore's hybrid style was, "like his poetry, a distinctive invention" that had no ulterior purpose but to express his "own sense of personhood" (Bharucha 2006: 131). Neither was it there to represent a quintessentially Indian dress, nor was it meant as an outfit to be emulated. The mismatch between the personal and the public complicated Tagore's travels in the West and often sent out mixed signals.

Indeed, there is something of a tension in the format of Tagore's Post-Nobel travels. On the one hand the award gave him a long-sought opportunity to establish personal contacts with the different countries and many remarkable individuals across the globe, but on the other, the unnatural celebrity outfit obstructed the possibilities of spontaneous exchange and communication. For all the privileged treatment Tagore received wherever he went, the burden of a celebrity figure inconvenienced him in no small measure, though he was certainly not above flattery

[15] "The Statues" in Yeats 1985: 375.
[16] *The Daily News and Leader* (21 January, 1913) in Kundu et all eds. 2000: 18-19.

or impervious to criticism. From Vienna, for example, he wrote to Rolland: "Every morning I wake up from sleep I find myself in a world where there are men who have no names, who are a moving mass, like clouds, who can only envelop you but cannot offer you company [...] Unfortunately for me I have a big reputation and people expect from me a big effect, a sensation in a wholesale quantity. What a waste!" (letter,13/07/1926, in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 329). At the other end of the spectrum: "Is there any other individual today in the world who is so fortunate as I am in gaining the adoration of such a multitude of peoples in spite of the insuperable obstacles against making himself fully known ...?" (letter to Leonard Elmhirst, 7/10/1926, *Ibid.*: 340). While appreciating fame "like a buffalo the luxury of a mud bath", as he put it in a letter to Thompson in 1921, Tagore understood how much "unreality there is in a literary reputation" (in Das Gupta ed. 2003: 133).

The gap between the poet and his audiences was also widened in cases where his visits were orchestrated and controlled by the political elites, inevitably wrong-footing him with the anti-establishment intellectual circles. Tagore, politically rather naïve in countries where he lacked insight, became "a useful and innocent tool which they knew how to handle for their own ulterior purposes" (Aronson 1978: ix). The 1926 episode with Benito Mussolini who had charmed the poet by gifting an almost complete library of Italian classics to Visva-Bharati and then used the Poet's visit for Fascist self-aggrandisement makes for the most objectionable part of Tagore's long international career.[17] Aronson reacted to the episode in these strong terms:

> Only utter political innocence could explain the grotesque spectacle of gentle poet and mad megalomaniac exchanging polite meaningless words over a cup of tea, a scene worthy of a drama of the absurd where the lines dividing the comic and the tragic become blurred and the human condition is shown to be as incomprehensible as it is revolting (1991: 32).

Part of the disaffection with Tagore that some Western readers experienced also arose from their perceptions that he was somehow not "Indian" or "Eastern" enough. He did not sustain their expectations derived from the exotic diet of Omar Khayyam or even Kipling (Aronson 1978: 11-20). Prefabricated conceptions of "East" and

[17] Eventually, through the intervention of Rolland, Tagore was made to see the scope of his misjudgement, and reacted by writing an open letter denouncing Fascism. For further insight including the many letters to Andrews and others, cf. Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 328-38; on Rolland's reaction to Tagore's visit in Italy, cf. Dutta and Robinson 2003: 269-70; for the open letter, cf. Tagore EW 3: 771-8, for Tagore's relations with Italy, cf. Flora 2008.

"West" presented a major drawback to a critical appraisal of the writer's literary sensibility. The reception of his works was harmed also by the tendency to judge his writing by Western standards. Tagore's short stories, for example, were set against the aesthetic norms of Edgar Allan Poe and were found lacking because they did not have the "single effect" (Pandit 1995: 208-9). Similarly, his drama, believed to be strongly derivative of Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist technique soon fell into disrepute for treating themes differently from the Belgian playwright (cf. Lal 2001). Tagore's novel *Gora* was relentlessly compared with Kipling's *Kim*; and finally, as a poet, he was branded a mystic (indebted strongly, it was believed, to Christian mysticism), so when the devotional poems of *Gitanjali* were followed by the publication of Tagore's early secular love lyrics *The Gardener* (1913), some reviewers saw this "move away" from spiritualism a weakness.[18] Tagore understood the logic at work. He is on record to have said in response to one such review: "[T]hey have labelled me a mystic and when I produce something that is not mystical they are offended".[19]

The problem of the narrowness of such Eurocentric readings also presented itself forcefully to Aronson, as he laboured through the vast body of responses to Tagore, published in Europe (and the United States) between 1920 and 1940: "Again and again literary critics refuse to discuss the East in terms of human beings and human experiences" (Aronson 1978: 15). This attitude has since been theoretically instituted as "Orientalism" and the Westerners who look at the Orient and "conceive of humanity either in large collective terms or in abstract generalities," giving little, if any, scope to "existential human identities" as "Orientalists" (Said 1995: 154-5).

No doubt, Saidian cultural critique provides a relevant template for analyzing the way Tagore was imagined in the West and how his constructed image served to reinforce the colonial point-of-view, but – aside from the reservations one might have against distilling human curiosity about, and desire to know, "the other" exclusively to conscious, or unconscious, motivations of power – his analysis proves of much more limited use once we move away from Western imperialist nations to the margins of the colonizing world.

The example of Germany is most often brought to attention to demonstrate that the association of Western orientalism with colonizing power is at best only

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[18] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14/10/1913, in Kundu et al 2000: 22.
[19] To Edward Thompson; recorded in Thompson's private record 17/11/1913, published as Appendix A in Thompson 1998: 116.

partly true. The fact that German scholars were the key translators and commentators of ancient Indian texts at the beginning of the nineteenth century as these were being channelled into Europe via British colonial employees, and that Germany then had virtually no interests in India or China, disproves any necessary direct link between orientalism and the project of colonial subjugation (Clarke 1998: 27). This is not to say that there were no continuities between the German view of an idealised East and those of the colonizing western powers. As Imre Bangha notes, German scholars still perceived Asians as "the other", but having themselves been "for long subjects of a fragmented nation and dominated by nearby foreign powers", their views of Indian culture threatened by European Imperialism was often driven by sympathy (Bangha 2008: 14).[20] Certainly, we must allow for various and more complex motivations and responses, even within the same parameters of othering, when discussing how "the West" engaged with and related to "the East".

J. J. Clarke's study of the encounter between Asian and Western thought complicates the Saidian thesis by foregrounding the counter-cultural and counter-hegemonic dimension to orientalism itself. Without disputing the basic premise that when Western thinkers drew on Eastern thought – the religious and philosophical ideas of India, China and Japan – they did so in line with their own goals and pursuits, Clarke rightly argues that these ideas were "often in the business not of reinforcing Europe's established role and identity, but rather of undermining it". They provided a source that would be exploited for a critique and re-evaluation of thought systems indigenous to the West and was often "an energiser of radical protest":

> [...] one of the pervasive features of orientalism which prevailed right throughout the modern period is the way in which, though perceived as 'other', Eastern ideas have been used in the West as an agency for self-criticism and self-renewal, whether in the political, moral, or religious spheres [for purposes, Clarke acknowledges, good and bad].

Furthermore:

> The perceived otherness of the Orient is not exclusively one of mutual antipathy, nor just a means of affirming Europe's

[20] For further insight into the German romantic projection of an India antithetical to Europe, and the specifics of Tagore's reception in Germany, strongly impregnated with such Romantic yearnings to find an alternative to Europe, cf. Kämpchen 1999.

> triumphant superiority, but also provides a conceptual framework that allows much fertile cross-referencing, the discovery of similarities, analogies, and models (Clarke 1998: 27).

It is within this more open and reciprocal model of otherness and inter-cultural (textual) encounters that much of how the West responded to Tagore can be made sense of more fully. Of course it must be recognized that the orientalist image of Tagore as sage and mystic *was* a Westen construct (regardless of Tagore's own input), and that this image can be seen as part of the larger picture of rationalizing colonial domination. The fact that Tagore's reputation in England plummeted as soon as he raised his political voice points to a tight discursive control of the subjugated other. His book *Nationalism* in 1917 was anathema to the English reading public, and his resignation of Knighthood two years later, in 1919, practically destroyed his reputation (Kripalani 2001: 257).[21] In this sense it is unfortunate that Tagore, whose nuanced view of cultures and cultural interdependencies have been discussed in the previous chapter, could in his foreign addresses – drawing to himself some of the aura set by otherwise a man of very different orientation, Swami Vivekanda (1863-1902) two decades earlier at *The Parliament of the World Religions* held in Chicago in 1893 – slide into the dominant nineteenth and early-twentieth century discourse of the spiritual East and the materialist West, thus reinforcing the binarism of imperial imagination.

Nevertheless, the trope of the mystic and spiritual guru does not allow us to identify the discourse indiscriminately with the dominant imperial ideology nor motivations behind it, for the reason that ideas of spirituality could be drawn on also to articulate an alternative self-definition and employed as a means of empowerment rather than oppression.[22] Orientalism allows for a variety of subject positions, and this in turn is closely linked with the cultural and power politics of the country, group or individual in question.

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[21] None of Tagore's Anglo-Saxon literary friends – neither Bridges, Rhys, Yeats, Moore, Trevelyan nor Pound – once mention Tagore's political writings in their letters to the poet (cf. Chakravarty ed. 1998: 45). For more, cf. also Kripalani 2001: 257.

[22] In the context of Irish Orientialism, for example, Innes has pointed out that feminists, such as Annie Besant, Eva Gore-Booth, Charlotte Despard and Margaret Cousins drew on Oriental sources – initially through Madame Blavatsky's theosophy, with its stress on the equality of male and female principles and on Isis as a female goddess of wisdom and equality – to voice an alternative tradition to the world of male domination. Their feminist aspirations were in turn often linked with the nationalist cause: Annie Besant, for example, was not only a staunch Home Rule supporter, but when she moved to India, she became one of the founding members of the Indian National Congress. Margaret Noble, another Irishwoman, joined Tagore in the nationalist agitation against the British partition of Bengal in 1905, before she became a disciple of Vivekananda and helped develop a Pan-Asian spirituality to oppose the materialist culture of the West (Innes 2002: 154 – 155).

Identification paradigm

Moving further to the margins of the colonizing world, I wish to draw on some of Imre Bangha's research on the encounter between Central Europe (specifically that of Hungary) and India. Rather than motivations to dominate over the East or secure a sense of a positive, superior identity for itself, Bangha has drawn our attention to how Hungarian readers would often sympathise with the Indian freedom struggle and not the colonizer's viewpoint (Bangha 2008: 15). Their ideas of the mystic orient were partly indebted to the German romantic attachment to, and view of, the East – what, in fairness, Said also briefly acknowledged to be "an element in a Romantic redemptive project" within the tradition that looked towards "the Orient" (Said 1995: 154) – and partly on a strong sense of identification with "the East" stemming from a consciousness or perceptions of one's own eastern origins:

> Till the present day Hungarians think that speaking a non-Indo-European language they are a lonely oriental people in Europe. [...] this idea is continuous with the romantic view in as much as it merges the idealised past of a nation into an imagined pristine East. It is, therefore, not a surprise that other nations in Northern, Eastern and Central Europe also cherished a consciousness of eastern kinship. Lithuanians link their nation to the Indo-Aryans because of the closeness or their language to Sanskrit. Scandinavians and Poles at a time linked themselves to the Scythians, who challenged the Roman Empire, while Bulgarians would emphasize their relationship with the Onogur Turks of the Eastern European steppe (Bangha 2008: 15).

The Hungarian scholar from Transylvania, Alexander Csoma de Körös (1784-1842), is a notable product of the romantic drive to establish proof of kinship between the Hungarians and the East combined with a passion for learning. He is a case in point, as Bangha argues, to contradict Saidian essentialism. From a small ethnic group, the Széklers, who in his time saw themselves as descendants from the Huns of the fifth century, Csoma set out in search for the origins of the Hungarian language, mastering Tibetan, Sanskrit and four vernacular Indian languages, including Bengali (the first Hungarian to do so) in the process. Though he did not find anything worth publishing on the origins of Hungarians in Asia, his search resulted in the creation of Tibetology: he authored the first scholarly Tibetan-English dictionary and the first Tibetan grammar. A Hungarian William Jones of sorts, he spent many years,

between 1831 and 1842, in Bengal, working mostly at the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta, the institution Jones had founded.

It was his association with the British, the fact that his research was enabled by and conducted under the aegis of the British Empire, and spurred by an intellectual climate where knowledge of the Tibetan language and culture was strategically important to the British, that has given rise to – not dissimilar to the postcolonial revisionist readings of Jones' achievements[23] – a Saidian interpretation that has left recent scholarship ambiguous about this man. Bangha, however, undermines the credibility of such reductionist approach that gives no consideration to the fact that Csoma came from "the periphery of European cultural circulation", a minority ethnic group, whose memories of the Hapsburg imperial oppression formed a strong part of their collective identity; or, his "patriotic enthusiasm" that sent him out "searching for relatives", not to mention the very curiosity factor that guides explorations of the unknown. Furthermore, in aligning Csoma's point of view with an imperial one, the evidence of the actual relationship between Csoma and the British or its nuances is conspicuously missing: how, for instance, he was "ridiculed in colonial circles" and how in turn, he had "kept [...] a discreet distance," refusing "British approaches that fell outside the scope of what he promised to do" as well as the perks, such as lodgings in the house of Major Lloyd, preferring instead a simple Indian hut (Bangha 2008: 41-48).[24]

Coming back to Tagore, however, and pressing the notion of identification with "the other" further, it remains to be said that many individuals and groups celebrated Tagore from their own real or imagined position of "otherness". Their cross-cultural response was framed by their perceived sense of commonality and joint purpose with the Indian poet. Their sympathies lay with the Indian freedom movement, and they genuinely looked to Tagore (and/or Gandhi) for moral sustenance as well as alternatives to some of the thinking that drives imperialist ideologies, seeking "to substitute a more holistic paradigm for old mechanistic and dualistic ways of thinking" (Clarke 1998: 105).

The phenomenon of anti-imperialist struggles deriving inspiration from, even asserting themselves in dialogue with, other anti-imperialist struggles has been pertinently explored by Elleke Boehmer, who swivels the more conventional centre-

[23] "To rule and to learn, then to compare Orient with Occident [...] these were Jones's goals" (Said 1995: 77-9 [78]).
[24] I draw entirely on Bangha's writing on Csoma, though the parallel with William Jones is my own.

vs-periphery axis around to explore "how resistance emerged not so much from the place of otherness as *amongst others*", through cross-cultural and trans-national influences and solidarity (original emphasis, 2002: 2). The "anti-colonial hand holding" that she explores between Bengali *swadeshi* movement and the Irish Sinn Féin ("Ourselves") for example, or the Irish nationalists supporting the Boer minority in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), though primarily self-interested, emerged from perceptions of grievances against the "common enemy". Ironically, such resistance was enabled by the empire itself: worldwide colonial networks of communication in the form of newspapers, the telegraph, new road, railway and faster sea links (*Ibid.*: 29-30; 12). Cross-border contact zones like the metropolis at the turn-of-the-century were also important meeting-ground for the colonial elites, where, alongside circulating new political and religious ideas, modernist and avant-garde cross-pollinations were taking place. It was in this expanded cosmopolitan context that in 1912 Ezra Pound, who secured six Tagore's poems for publication in the journal *Poetry*, wrote that the personal encounter with the Orient captured in the translated poetry of Rabindranath Tagore would usher in an important period of "world-fellowship" (*Ibid.*: 22-3).[25] But if Ezra Pound's interest in Tagore seriously dwindled even before Tagore won the Nobel Prize, and Yeats' not long thereafter – Tagore's fame in the Anglo-American world had practically altogether run the length of its course by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century – on the continent, it was positively on the rise. Tagore's "most astonishing successes" were his European tours of 1921, 1926 and 1930 (Radice 1994: 27).[26]

It was indeed in the 1920s that Tagore's popularity reached unprecedented heights across Central and Eastern Europe, and it is to this wave of his popularity that Kosovel's response belongs to. Moreover still, as Bangha has suggested, Tagore's greatest supporters were to be found among the readers and writers who were born or lived in regions "lost" after WWI. This was certainly true in the case of Hungary, when two thirds of Hungary's historic territory came under the old and new neighbouring ethnic states. And this was not, as Bangha notes, simply because the centres of Hungarian literary life then fell outside the new borders, for even in Budapest it was the writers whose "hometown had been 'lost' that wrote about Tagore". In other words, these writers "had an additional motivation to perceive the irrationality of western thought that led to a war and then to a peace that they

[25] Ezra Pound (1912), "Tagore's Poems", *Poetry*, 1. 3.
[26] For more on Pound and Tagore cf. Hurwitz 1964.

considered unjust. Their disillusionment urged them to examine whether Rabindranath would offer an alternative to western thinking" (Bangha 2008: 89-90). Something similar can be said of Srečko Kosovel who became a Ljubljana-based writer after his hometown had been unjustly "lost" to Italy following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The identification hypothesis can be pursued even further, when we consider some of the letters Tagore received from an average European reader. These show that apart from identification along personal lines, there were many cases where various marginalised groups and organization s wrote to the poet for endorsement of their case. Alongside appeals by various women's organization s from across Europe,[27] the letters, for example, included an appeal from a *Hilfskomitee* for German emigrants in what was then Czechoslovakia,[28] or from the editors of a Roma journal describing the plight of the Roma under Tzarist Russia and contrasting it with the more favourable circumstances emerging with the October revolution.[29] There was even a letter from the Czech "Union of German societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals", appealing to Tagore for moral support in setting up an anti-vivisection hospital.[30]

Famous as Tagore was, such letters need hardly surprise us, but they are interesting insofar as they indicate the various points of contact people made with Tagore, substantiating the model of situational identification where a sense of intimacy is developed with someone along all sorts of lines, as we intuit shared predicaments and expectations.[31] In turn also, Tagore seemed to have taken these gestures seriously, giving support where he could. In September 1940, to give one last example, he received a letter from a Polish woman by the name of Maryla Falk, who was the initiator and the then secretary of the newly-established Indo-Polish Association in Calcutta. She had been a Lecturer in Slavonic Languages at Calcutta University since 1939, forging stronger links between Poland and India through the Association to which Tagore accepted the honorary chairmanship (cf. Pobozniak

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[27] For example, Tagore received a letter from the "Hungarian Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom" outlining the scope of their work as a joint fight for woman suffrage, equal rights and peace, asking Tagore to give a talk at their organization as part of his Hungarian trip. Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan, letters to Rabindranath Tagore in 1926, Budapest, July 6, 1926.

[28] Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan, Serial no. 74, Czechoslovakia File, letter, December 13, 1937.

[29] Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan, Serial no. 333, Russia File, letter, September 24, 1930.

[30] Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan, Serial no. 74, Czechoslovakia File, letter, January 30, 1935.

[31] I extrapolate from Hogan 2004: 26. Cf. p. 15 above.

1961: 354). Her letter conveys sentiments of sympathy derived from identifying Poland's own relation to its struggle for independence with India's current historical predicament, from which, the author hopes, clearly inspired by Tagore's own philosophy, the "call to true humanity might again be heard in the world". In turn, shortly before he died, Tagore sent a message to the Association in support of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Third of May Constitution of Poland: "I warmly associate myself with the 150th Anniversary of the May Constitution of Poland – may justice and humanity prevail in a peaceful reconstruction of civilisation".[32]

Letters such as this make one appreciate the scope and diversity of responses Tagore occasioned *within* Europe. It is also here that the lines between colonial, nationalist, class and gender struggles get blurred and merge into a broader emancipatory discourse. The above examples suggest also links and correspondences between anti-imperialism and various other anti-hegemonic discourses as unexpected as that of agitation for animal welfare. In a suggestively titled book *Affective Communities* (2006) and in the context of late Victorian radicalism, Leela Gandhi has looked at the so-called "western 'nonplayers' in the drama of imperialism," identifying a notable current of metropolitan anti-imperialism in an array of "minor" anti-imperialist discourses (1-2). Vegetarian and animal-rights campaigners, anti-vivisectionists, theosophists, homosexuals, she argues, all articulated their singular programmes as a variation on the theme of anti-imperial politics. Her fresh perspective seeks "discursive and ethical continuities between the critic of the fox hunt and the critic of the empire" on the grounds that the two are joined by opposition to the binarism of imperial reason that insists on dichotomies between races, cultures, genders, sexualities, and so on (*Ibid.*: 11).

Freethinking individuals and groups often forged trans-national links and solidarities, seeking solutions to imperial oppression in international fraternalism (Boehmer 2002: 17). Personal relationships and networks, realized in practice through travel and correspondence, were crucial for creating worldwide platforms of solidarity. For instance, when in 1919 Romain Rolland sent Tagore, along with his first letter to him, a document entitled "Declaration of Independence of the spirit", this was an explicit attempt to forge closer ties between "East" and "West". It sought to enlist Tagore's support for a protest mounted in the name of the ideal of spiritual oneness of humanity that would

[32]Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan, Serial no. 297, Poland File, letter, April 12, 1941

obliterate frontiers of nations. Tagore was only too glad to put his name down to a document, a part of which read as follows (among other signatories were Henri Barbusse, Alfred Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce, Arnold Zweig, Hermann Hesse, Selma Lagerlof):

> We serve Truth alone which is free, with no frontiers, with no limits, with no prejudices of race and caste. Of course we shall not dissociate ourselves from the interests of Humanity! We shall work for it, but for it as *a whole*. We do not recognize nations. We recognize the people one and universal, – the people who suffer, who struggle, who fall and rise again, and who ever march forward on the rough road, drenched with their sweat and their blood, – the people comprising all men, all equally our brothers. And it is in order to make them, like ourselves aware of this fraternity, that we raise above their blind battles the Arch of Alliance, of the Free Spirit, one and manifold, eternal (in Aronson and Kripalani eds. 1945: 22).

Tagore, who had long been looking towards the West for signs of common purpose, gladly accepted the invitation to "join the ranks of those free souls" as he wrote back to Rolland, happy that "the higher conscience of Europe had been able to assert itself" (*Ibid.*: 106). Rolland first read Tagore during the war while in voluntary exile in Switzerland, and felt immediate intellectual kinship with a man who crusaded against nationalism in the name of "the moral man, the complete man". Tagore in turn found in Rolland the realization of sincerity and courage that he was longing to find in Europe (Aronson and Kripalani 1945: 1).

Mention must be made of another manifesto, The Clarte Manifesto (1919), which was similar in orientation but "richer in socio-political content as well as more specific in spelling out goals and lines of battle for the liberation of humanity". Drawn up in the same year by a group of French intellectuals and activists, spearheaded by Henri Barbusse, it spoke "bluntly against privilege and inheritance, against concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, and advocated class-struggle as a means to end war and classes". Likewise it was sent to Tagore for signing, and likewise Tagore lent his name in support, alongside other writers such as Anatole France, H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. Apparently, a copy of it also came into the hands of the one-time nationalist leader of Bengal, Bipin Chandra Pal, who used excerpts of it in a public speech in Calcutta on December 12, 1919 (Poddar 2004: 149-51). How resonant and internationally significant such documents were at the time is borne out also by Kosovel's endorsement of Rolland's "*Déclaration*

d'independence de l'esprit", which he translated into Slovenian in 1926 and had it published.

The utopian thrust and revolutionary fervour of these documents certainly found explicit echoes in some of Tagore's grander proclamations (as it did in Kosovel's), and testified to the forgings of trans-national solidarities: "Our fight is a spiritual fight, it is for Man. We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him – these organization s of National Egoism [...]" (1921, in Bhattacharya 2005: 55). While standing in contrast to Tagore's more realistic project of building an institution in India for the encouragement of hermeneutical dialogue between East and West, the proclamation nevertheless anticipates his active involvement in the orientalist enterprise (of Clarke's kind), which the winning of the Nobel Prize, as we have seen, at once promoted and complicated.

Having established the diversity of responses that Tagore elicited within Europe, particularly with respect to the more marginalized individuals and groups, and the various networks of trans-national solidarity this gave rise to, it is worth noting that Tagore, in turn, felt himself drawn to the margins of Europe, sensing, as he wrote to Leonard Elmhirst, "a mysterious feeling of kinship" with the less industrialized part of the continent as opposed to the powerful countries of the West (7/11/1926, in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 339). Recovering from severe exhaustion at the sanatorium at Lake Balaton in Hungary on what was his fifth and longest European tour, he wrote in the same letter:

> Doctors advise me to take the shorter eastern route to India through Yugoslavia, Serbia [*sic*], Constantinople, Greece and Egypt. The prescription is very much like the French wine ordered for me in Milan; it is tempting. The people [in] this eastern corner of Europe are perfectly charming – their personality unshrouded by the grey monotony of a uniform civilization that has overspread the western world. It is mixed with something primitive and therefore is fresh and vital and warmly human. How naively simple and direct is the expression of their feeling for me. I am the guest of the people here, their one object being to nurse me into health taking real pride in rendering this service (*Ibid.*: 340).

Effectively his return journey to India took him on a whistle-stop tour of the Balkans between 13 and 17 November, with two days spent in Zagreb and two in Belgrade, before going onto Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Egypt to finally return to India. Meeting various heads of state on the way, and travelling in special government-

provided coupes, Tagore once more brought criticism upon himself for ignoring the political realities behind his staged receptions. "Our Great Tagore, after his visit to Mussolini", objected Rolland, "has once again been ill advised to have himself received and patronised by the criminals who are torturing Bulgaria and Romania" (in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 339). Tagore's refusal to pay heed to political systems need not really surprise us. For, indeed, individuals always meant more to him than systems, and he placed more honour in trust than suspicion. He was also, in contrast to Rolland, less convinced of the greater righteousness of Western Europe compared to Eastern Europe (*Ibid.*). He felt "the big nations" with their "reckless career of political ambition and adventures of greed" had forfeited their "natural privilege [...] to stand for the right when any great wrong is done to humanity" (*Ibid.*: 340).

Thinking ahead to the post-independence India and the non-alignment movement which joined the subcontinent and Yugoslavia in the same global political stand,[33] Tagore's ideas can be seen to foreshadow some of these developments (cf. Das Gupta 2006: 8). For the ideological seeds of India's non-alignment strategy with either the Western or Communist blocs were rooted in its freedom struggle and subsequently reflected in Nehru's democratic socialist ideals informing his foreign policy. The alignment of India's anti-colonial struggle with the freedom struggles of colonized nations elsewhere – a commitment Nehru publicly articulated once the Congress had created its own Foreign Department in 1928 and begun taking an active interest in international affairs – was primarily portrayed in terms of "a moral imperative rooted in India's traditional values of tolerance and non-violence." Non-alignment was not a simple position of neutrality, but an active stance that would secure the post-independence India "the moral high ground for itself in international relations" (Talbot 2000: 173-4). Much of the idealism pertaining to such a view finds traces in Tagore's thinking, where India's perceived role was in giving the lie to the model that measures man's greatness by his material resources, foregrounding spiritual values instead. Kosovel too, as we shall see, was, in an important sense, a virtual precursor to the non-alignment movement.

[33] The whole movement was the brainchild of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Egyptian President Nasser, and Tito of Yugoslavia (supported by Sukarno of Indonesia and Nkrumah of Ghana). The first NAM summit was held in Belgrade in 1961.

Claiming the Indian laureate[34]

When Tagore's English *Gitanjali* (The Song Offerings) first came out in 1912, edited and famously introduced by W. B. Yeats, the Irish poet's eulogy to Tagore travelled far beyond the English-speaking world. In the first article to be written on Tagore in Slovenia, Oton Župančič (1878-1949), the leading modernist poet of the pre-war generation, based his piece largely on Yeats's laudatory preface (cf. 1914). If Tagore's fame in England was launched through the efforts of the Anglo-American-Irish literary elite, also in Slovenia, it was the enthusiasm of some of the country's foremost writers that introduced Tagore to the general reading public and generated what to this day remains an unprecedented response of its readership to any literary figure of international stature. Following some of the early translations done by Miran Jarc (1900-1942) and France Bevk (1890-1970), it was the talented poet Alojz Gradnik (1882-1967) who devoted himself wholeheartedly to translating Tagore's works. During the war, he came across a copy of *The Crescent Moon* in a bookshop in Trieste, and taken by what he read he decided to introduce as much of Tagore's poetry as was then available in English to Slovenian readership (cf. Bartol 1961).

One after another, the following titles came out: *Rastoči mesec / The Crescent Moon* (1917; sold out within months and republished in 1921), *Ptice Selivke / Stray Birds* (1921), *Vrtnar / The Gardener* (1922), *Žetev / Fruit Gathering* (1922) and *Gitandžali ali žrtveni spevi / The Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (1924).[35] These collections are being reprinted to this day.[36] Alongside many newspaper and journal articles about the poet, as well as translations of his novels (*The Home and the World, The Wreck, Gora*), essayistic writings (*Sadhana,* excerpts from *Nationalism,* and *The Religion of Man*) and the staging of two of his plays, *The Post Office* and *Chitra* at the Ljubljana City Theatre, Tagore can be said to have found a permanent place in the Slovenian letters.[37]

Understandably, Tagore's fame with Slovenian readership peaked around the time of the first poetry publications, which laid the ground for a more serious appreciation of the poet's artistic credo. Kosovel's response to Tagore's poetry and

[34] This section is adapted from Jelnikar 2008a.
[35] For details, cf. Bibliography.
[36] Both *The Gardener* and *Gitanjali* were republished in a new edition in Slovenia this year, and were made a feature of a popular weekly programme *Knjiga mene briga* [Not Interested in Books] on national TV channel (TVSl 1) on 27/05/2009. Though Tagore's works continue to be republished, the translations are the same old ones from the twenties. The most up-to-date translation is that of Janko Moder's *Gitanjali* (1978).
[37] For en excellent piece of Tagore's wider reception in Yugoslavia, cf. Petrović 1970.

philosophy also belongs to this particular wave of his popularity, in which the creative writer is beginning to take precedence over the earlier more politically-motivated appraisal. Slovenes initial response to Tagore, though largely dominated by extra-literary factors rather than any real appreciation of the poet's sensibility, nevertheless marks an important stage in the building of his reputation, and is not entirely off the mark. Moreover, it bespeaks a sense of shared concerns, for which Slovenes were sympathetically drawn to Tagore and what he stood for.

In a substantial article entitled "Last year's rivals for the Nobel Prize" (1914), Tagore's winning of the Nobel Prize is juxtaposed to the defeat of the Austrian poet Peter Rossegger. This rival nominee was not only a poet whose name the Austrians proposed to the Swedish Academy in the same year as Thomas Sturge Moore put Tagore's name up for consideration, but also a name associated with the aggressive Germanization policy pursued against Slovenes in Southern Carinthia and Southern Styria. For a time Rossegger was closely linked with the nationalist organisation called *Südmark Schulverein*, which aided German-language schools in ethnically Slovenian or mixed territories.[38]

Against this background, the author sets "a spiritual giant of enormous horizons" in opposition to a parochial writer who "fans the flames of nationalist hatred". Tagore, perceived as one who "bleeds from the love of his fettered country" and yet "firmly acknowledges the rights of the opponents, even stresses them", is celebrated for his love of humanity as opposed to love of nation. His patriotic songs are seen as perfect expressions of "his universalism". They are not "boisterous fighting hymns", the author stresses, but "soft idealisations of his country, fuelled by unselfishness and firm belief in the day when his enslaved country will rise" (Lokar 1914: 246).

In spite of the narrow framework in which the discussion of Tagore is positioned by this article, the poet's vision of India's anti-colonial struggle is nevertheless portrayed with some insight. Here is "a patriot" whose voice is tuned to the deepest harmonies of humanity, refusing to surrender the task of his country's liberation from under foreign rule to a nationalist agenda. Indeed, as argued in previous chapters, through a critique of both imperialism and its anti-colonial nationalist derivation, Tagore gave his anti-colonialism a significantly broader base.

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[38] This force in the Germanization of the Slav population in the region was similar to the role of the Italian *Lega Nazionale* in the Slovenian Littoral, Kosovel's native region. For more on the latter, see Novak 1970: 3-22.

It was precisely this high ideal underscored by the article that was to resonate with Kosovel, who aimed for a like-minded resolve with respect to Slovenes and their struggle for political and cultural autonomy. In fact, from its beginning, Tagore's popularity in Slovenia was connected less with the romantic side of Orientalism that looked towards India for a redemptive spiritual injection and saw in Tagore above all "the exotic and bearded Oriental prophet" (Petrović 1970: 13), than with a sense of identification with the poet and his people, derived from a perceived common goal of striving after political and cultural independence. So strongly did Slovenes identify with Tagore and his historical predicament of colonization that they imagined themselves to have played a vital part in his international fortunes – a misplaced gesture of patriotism perhaps?

In an interview in the 1960s, Tagore's poet-translator Alojz Gradnik said that Slovenes were directly responsible for Tagore's wining the Nobel Prize, something, he regretted, not many people were aware off. The interviewer, Vladimir Bartol, somewhat surprised by this stupendous claim, asked him to elaborate. Presenting the already familiar details of Rosegger's nomination for the Nobel Prize in the same year as Tagore's, Gradnik provides the additional connection between the alleged undermining of the Austrian poet's credentials as a Nobel Prize candidate by the Slovenes, and the Swedish Nobel Prize Committee's coming to know of this protest. In other words, how did the Swedish Academy come to learn that Roseggers was an unsuitable candidate, denying some Slovenes the right to their identity? We are told it was the priest-poet Anton Aškerc (1856 – 1912), himself an Indophile, who made the vital intervention. With the help of his Swedish friend Alfred Jensen (1859-1921), an influential man of letters and member of the Nobel Committee, the Swedish Academy came to learn of Rosegger's dubious character. The Austrian poet was subsequently dropped from candidacy. Hence Tagore had no rival – or so the logic of the article runs (Bartol 1961).[39]

It seems hard to believe that Rossegger would have seriously stood a chance against Tagore, as indeed against Thomas Hardy (1840 - 1928) or Anatole France (1844 - 1924), two other contenders for the distinction of the highest literary award in 1913, and who, unlike Rossegger, are not given a word of mention in any of the Slovenian articles. Considering also that Aškerc died in June 1912, there is further

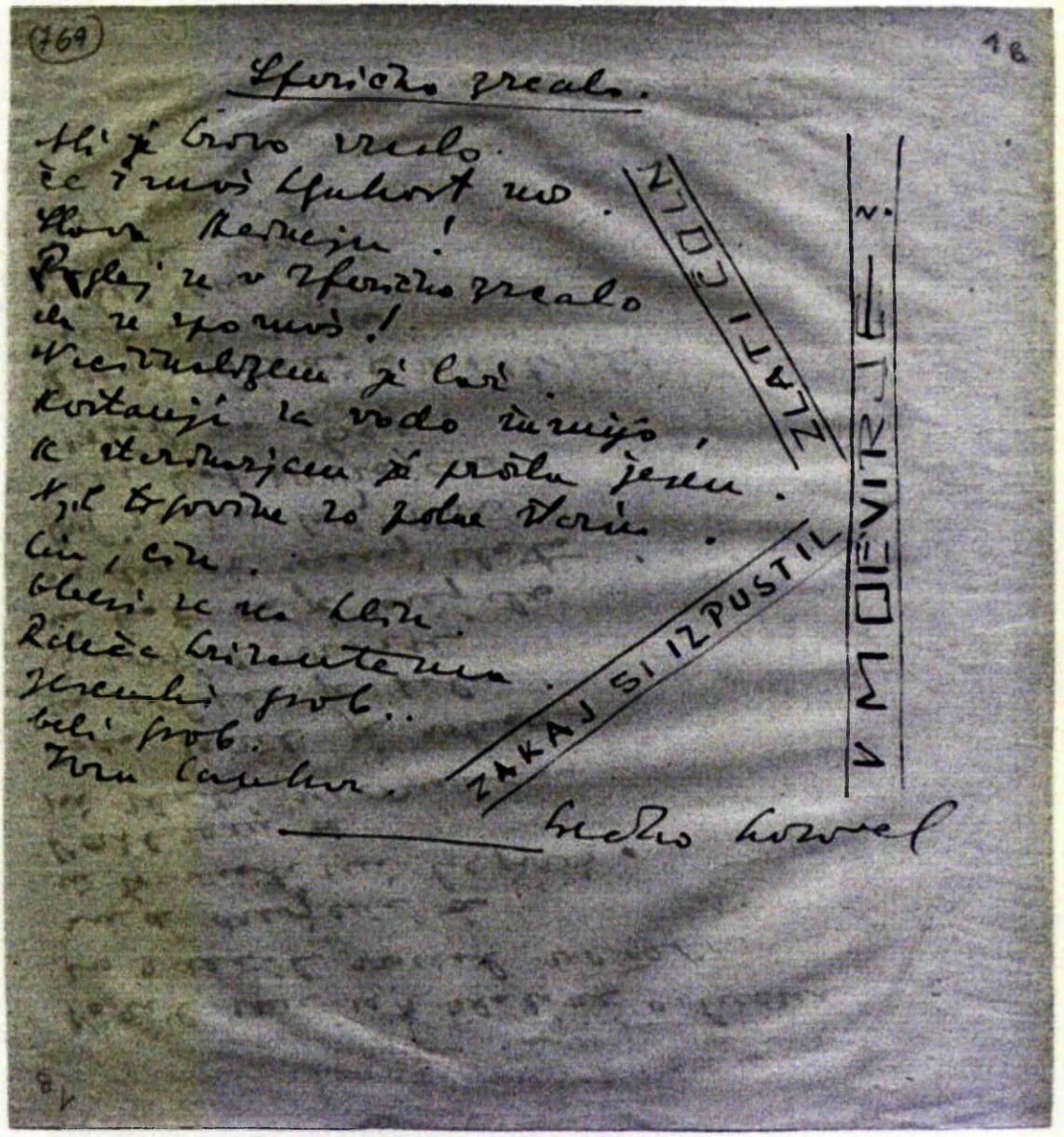
[39] According to Lokar, Germans, resenting this turn of events, saw in the Swedish Academy's policy a clear bias for the Slavs. The old Slavic-Germanic animosity came to play a significant part in the shaping of perceptions of Tagore's winning the Nobel Prize on both sides, Lokar 1914: 246.

reason to question the above inferences – but possibly he still had time to convey his grievance to Jensen?

Whatever the case may have been, Gradnik's point had an altogether deeper meaning, to suggest, in his own words, "that between Indians, Tagore and [Slovenes], there is a certain affinity – for the soft and romantic lyric" (*Ibid.*). Tagore's lyrics have indeed been read and cherished by poets, writers and lay readers alike, included as they were also in the school curricula.[40] Srečko Kosovel, however, did more than just enjoy Tagore's writing. As Gradnik before him through the act of translation, Kosovel, through the act of writing, integrated Tagore's verses and ideas into his own poetic and intellectual horizon, thereby making it an indelible part of his own tradition. It is as much Tagore the soft lyricist that can be sensed behind some of Kosovel's lines, in poems such as "*Klic po samoti*" ("Call for Solitude", cf. Appendix B: 260), as is Tagore the fierce critic of nationalism that transpires through much of Kosovel's thought. In fact, the two strains that inform Tagore's Slovenian, as well as wider Yugoslav, reception in the twenties – the political and aesthetic – converge in the legacy of Kosovel's work.

[40] The poem "Authorship" in Gradnik's translation was included in the 7th grade literature and language primer. Tagore was also read as the obvious representative of modern Indian literature at the secondary school level, as part of the world literature component.

PART III



Scanned Kosovel's original manuscript of the poem "Spherical Mirror".

5. EUROPE AND ITS "OTHERS": KOSOVEL LOOKS "EAST"

Hey, green parrot!
Tell us how it is in Europe?
The green parrot replies:
Man is not symmetrical.

Kosovel, "Green Parrot"[1]

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet and thinker Srečko Kosovel (1904 – 1926) read with great interest, at the same time urging other people to read him, convinced that here was someone who was able to show a "new path" out of the crisis Europe in general and the Slovenian people in particular were experiencing in the disillusionment of the post-Great-War years. Affected by the modernist *angst* of what Robert Musil called "incoherent ideas spreading outward without a centre" (1995: 15), the young poet strove to find a centre that would nevertheless hold.

Tagore's place among Kosovel's international community of admired artists – the ones he felt were conscientious in their creative ambitions, striving to broaden existential and imaginative possibilities of art – is however secured not from some robust act of appropriation, but through a strong sense of shared concerns grounded in an anti-imperialist, universalist ethos. Tagore was perceived to be a kindred spirit not because Kosovel was suffering from some kind of a delusional fantasy – what after all could a young, still anonymous poet, barely out of his teens, have in common with a mature, world-renowned figure of Tagore's stature? – but because, sensitised by Slovenian circumstances, he was able to identify with him and relate to his historical predicament of colonial subjugation. It is therefore more in the spirit of parity and equality that Kosovel approaches Tagore, as opposed to an Eastern guru at whose feet one should sit, or, following the colonial mindset, "an Oriental" who deserves to be patronised.

Instead of pointing to the contrasts between these two so very different literary figures and their respective cultures, I wish to concentrate on the common ground that binds them into an unexpected relational framework. It is against their distinct but structurally similar positioning within their cultures as colonized subjects

[1] In Kosovel 2008: 130.

(the term will be qualified with respect to Slovenes) that Kosovel's endorsement of Tagore's ideas can be made sense of more fully. Rather than the more conventional, one-way model of influence, I therefore adopt the broader model of situational identification where, to state once again, sympathies are forged between individuals and inspirations derived from a sense of shared predicaments, feelings, ideas, references and expectations.

This chapter aims to establish grounds for comparison as it situates Kosovel against the larger historical forces, which powerfully influenced his writing and concerns. It was indeed the political circumstances of the early decades of the twentieth century, as Slovenes were caught in the cross-fire of a number of aggressive nationalisms (external and internal), that in large part galvanised the poet to grapple with the problematic of nation and nationhood. Perhaps not without irresolvable tensions, but certainly with the creative input of a poet, he strove for a definition of Slovenianness that even as it remained sensitive to the particular needs of the Slovenian people, espousing their right to self-determination, refused to yield to an inward-looking or separatist stance.

Life and background

Srečko Kosovel was born in 1904, in the small town of Sežana, some twenty miles away from the city of Trieste. Both Trieste and his hometown region of the Karst, the limestone (from which it takes its name) hinterland to the east of the city, were then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, as was the territory that later became Slovenia. The youngest of five children, he was brought up in a well-established and respected family. His father Anton Kosovel (1860 - 1933) held the admirable post of a school teacher and headmaster. He taught in the Slovene language, which given the centuries-old Germanic tutelage meant cultivating a vital bond amongst a people who were dispersed amongst several Habsburg provinces, living almost entirely in the Austrian half of what had been the Dual Monarchy since 1867.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century the Slovenes were largely illiterate peasantry living in Habsburg-ruled territories where the language of administration and education was either German or Italian. After the revolutionary year 1848, however, and on the back of a "strong tradition of defending and cultivating their language and culture against a millennium of foreign rule and assimilative pressures", the Slovene "awakeners" had made it their primary focus to

first develop and disseminate a standardized Slovene language and then ascertain the right of its public use in schools and administration. By the first decade of the twentieth century Slovenes had achieved almost universal literacy, in turn also becoming nationally conscious of themselves as Slovenes (Rusinow 2003: 15-6).

Srečko's father, in other words, still belonged "the generation of teachers", as Tatjana Rojc has put it, "who felt their vocation in terms of a national mission" (2005: 99). While the culturo-linguistic movement preceded the political one, rising national consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century also meant increasing pressures from the Slovene political élites on the central government in Vienna to grant fuller autonomy to the small Slavic people within the Empire. Until very late in the day, in orientation and their goals, Slovene political élites remained decidedly "Austro-Slav" rather than "Yugo-slav" ("yug" meaning "south"). With the exception of the young radical group of pro-Yugoslav and openly anti-Austrian revolutionaries that formed around the journal *Preporod* (Revival) in 1912,[2] Slovenes before the war envisioned the unification of all Habsburg Slav territories into an autonomous unit, but within the Empire (Velikonja 2003: 85-6). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, partly as a reaction against mounting threats of Germanization, and partly because it became clear their expectations of the democratization of the Empire were unfounded (their hopes were firther dashed under the oppressive Habsburg war regime), the idea of a Yugoslav unity, which had in fact been around for almost a century, received overwhelming support. "The unification of the Habsburg South Slavs [the state of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs] and Serbia, which had just united with Montenegro, was proclaimed in Belgrade on 1 December 1918" to then emerge as "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" (officially renamed as Yugoslavia in 1929). The enthusiasm for the creation of the new state, which offered guarantees against Italy and Austria, and possibilities of national emancipation together with cultural and economic development was, however, soon tainted by the fact that a large number of Slovenes (and Croats) remained outside the newly established state (*Ibid.*: 87).

In view of Srečko's pre-war background, it is important to understand his father's teaching in Slovenian as part of the existing tradition of cultivating and defending a language and culture against the assimilative pressures of alien rule, while at the same time we must acknowledge the ambiguities pertaining to the pro-Austrian political orientation of most Slovenes at that time. For indeed, on the eve of

[2] They aimed for Slovenes' unification within an independent South-Slavic state.

the First World War, when the 65th anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph's rule was being celebrated, Anton organized a commemoration in their village to mark the event, and Srečko, then aged ten, read a poem titled "*Moja Avstrija*/ My Austria" (Cenčič 2004: 4).[3]

Nonetheless, Anton was a proud Slovenian, and this stance often got him into trouble with the Austrian authorities. Soon after Srečko was born, the family had to move to a nearby town of Pliskovica. Two years later they were forced to move again, this time to Tomaj. It was in Tomaj, a village of something over 600 inhabitants, predominantly vine and wheat-growing farmers, battling with the harsh conditions of the wind-swept, dry landscape of the Karst region, that they finally came to stay, and Kosovel to spend a good part of his early childhood. With a father who was also a musician, a choirmaster, an organ player, and who had an additional interest in farming, Kosovel children were given a broad base of an education spanning culture and economic matters.[4] Aged seven, the Kosovel children were already learning French, Russian and German and grew up in a vibrant household that attracted many artists and intellectuals of the region and beyond.

No doubt some of the father's passionate commitment to Slovenian matters passed on to the young boy, even if Srečko did not follow his father's wishes that he become a forester and help develop the region. From his mother, Katarina Stres (1962 – 1938), on the other hand, he may have inherited a streak of defiance as well as curiosity about the world. As a young girl, Katarina rebelled against her own parents, refusing to marry the man of their choice. She ran away from her native village of Sužid to the cosmopolitan hub of the old Austria, the multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious city of Trieste. There she took up with a Greek noble family, the Scaramagnas, as a nanny for their two daughters. In spite of scant formal education, her knowledge and experience of the world were wide.[5]

[3] Unfortunately, no more detail on the poem is provided.
[4] Anton Kosovel ran classes for adults, taught schoolchildren how to grow vines, tend fruit-trees, and was a champion of Karst forestation to improve the soil for agriculture.
[5] For biographical detail, I draw on Berger 1982; Cenčič 2004; Mislej-Božič 2004; Jelen 2004.

Srečko with his parents, scanned photograph from manuscript collection NUK, Ljubljana

Srečko's happy childhood years were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. Soon after the new battlefront opened up along the river Isonzo (Soča) not even fifteen miles to the west of Tomaj, where some of the fiercest fighting between the Austrians and Italians took place, his parents sent the twelve-year old boy, together with his sister Anica, to Ljubljana (the present-day Slovenian capital but then, known as Laibach, a provincial town of some fifty thousand inhabitants near the southern extremity of the Empire). By then he had already seen the horrors of war from close-up, and his childhood innocence soon passed into the knowledge of death. His oldest sister Antonija told of young Srečko witnessing a truck-load of wounded soldiers brought to Tomaj, where the village school had been transformed into a makeshift hospital. She described him as being transfixed by the blood he saw dripping from the sides of the cart.[6] It was an experience such as this that must have fed some of the blood imagery in his poetry, as in his poem "*Ekstaza smrti*/Ecstasy of Death" (1925) to be discussed in the course of the chapter.

The remaining ten years of his short life Kosovel was to live in Ljubljana, coming home for the summer and term breaks. During these holidays, he often

[6] From conversation with Pavle Skrinjar, a former director of the Kosovel museum at *Ljudska univerza* in Sežana and a personal friend of the late Antonija Kosovel.

visited Trieste –"the city sandwiched between Italy and Yugoslavia" (Hametz: 144) – which together with his native Karst, and adopted home of Ljubljana, was one of the three major locales defining the spatial geography of his life. A look at Trieste's turbulent history, the shifting political designations of the city and its hinterland, of what historians have referred to as "the Adriatic boundary region" (Sluga 2001: 13), will help us place Kosovel not just in relation to Slovenes and Europeans but also, perhaps more unexpectedly, open up the wider perspective of his relationship with Tagore.

For generations, political antipathies between subjects and rulers notwithstanding, this contemporary of Calcutta thrived as a commercial and trading port, largely unperturbed by notions of ethnicity, race or religion. For not unlike Calcutta, Trieste was brought into the modern world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the Habsburgs who declared it a Free Port in 1719, and was transformed from a small fishing village into an imperial city.[7]

In his eloquent study *The Years of Bloom* (2000), John McCourt, describing James Joyce's long-standing relationship with the city, tells us that Trieste of the early twentieth century was "the third urban centre in the empire after Vienna and Prague [and] the world's seventh busiest port" (McCourt 2000: 29). Located at the cross-roads of competing cultures, this "dynamic city characterized by commercial solidity and also notable for its intellectual curiosity and openness" was a melting pot of nationalities, languages and cultures (*Ibid.*: 30). The diverse and hybrid character of its population in the wake of rapid urbanization encouraged by its status as a free port, soon turned Trieste into a microcosm of Europe, bringing together Italians, Austrians, Germans, Slovenes as the largest ethnic Slav minority, alongside Croatians, Serbs, Bosnians, as well as Greeks, Armenians, Hungarians, Jews, English and others. The mix of nationalities and cultures that came to participate in the region persistently frustrated attempts at neat classification based on absolutes of national difference, while at the same time inviting precisely such clean-cut categorisations. As cogently argued by Glenda Sluga, the history of Trieste (Triest for Austrians and Trst for Slovenes and Croats) was vitally bound up with the representation of cultural/ethnic/racial difference of its diverse populace, where models of

[7]This comparison occurred to me while reading Jan Morris's book on Trieste, where she mentions other "imperial cities" including Calcutta. Cf.Morris 2001: 26.

heterogeneous identity clashed and competed with essentialist models grounded in homogeneity (Sluga 2001: 17).[8]

In Trieste, the Kosovel children would often go to see a Strindberg or an Ibsen play at the popular Teatro Verdi or Teatro Rossetti, as well as performances at the Slovenian theatre house, founded in 1903 as the first Slovenian theatre (Pahor 1971: 25). While today the city is predominantly Italian, with Slovenes forming a small ethnic minority, the turn-of-the-century Trieste had a Slovenian population larger than that of Ljubljana.[9] It was an important centre of Slovenian culture, where cultural institutions were established soon after the revolutionary year of 1848, and the Slovene political party *Edinost* ("Unity") was founded as early as in 1874. At the same time – and importantly so for young Kosovel – it was a rich and vibrant cosmopolitan city.

In the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as different narratives of national identity were being constructed, Trieste and the boundary region were transformed from what was "imaginatively represented as mixed" into "an unproblematically 'Italian' space" (*Ibid.*: 6; 7). In the decades leading up to the collapse of the Empire, the city's multiethnic composition, thoroughly shaken through the consequences of war and further unsettled by revived old enmities between Italians and Slavs, crumbled into factions vying for their political dues: "Slavic propagandists championed the rights of the Slovene and Croat populations" and "Italian nationalists clamoured for the redemption of 'Trento and Trieste', seeking to unite all Italian populations under the flag of Italy" (Hametz: 14).[10] Racial bigotry erupted, and with the political barometer decidedly pro-Italian, Slavs became the butt of persecution.

Kosovel referred to the year of 1918 as a "catastrophic defeat" in which "our destiny was decided by foreigners and not ourselves" (CW 3: 34). He must have been referring to the Secret Treaty of London (1915), in which Britain had promised Italy the possession of swathes of territory as an incentive to enter the war on the side of the Entente: Trieste, the whole of eastern Adriatic coastal region (excluding the port

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[8] Cf. pp.12-38 for the role of representation in the troubled history of the region, as sourced from a range of nineteenth-century anthropological and ethnographic research, preoccupied with classifying cultural/national difference in the region.

[9] According to 1910 Austrian census "the city of Trieste was 62 percent Italian, and 25 to 30 percent Slovene"(Sluga 2001: 30). Slovene historians have adopted these figures, invariably quoting 60,000 as the number for Triestine Slovenes and 52,000 for Ljubljana's Slovene population.

[10] Italian irredentists (from *irredentismo*, the condition of being unredeemed) were nationalists who, following Garibaldi's motto "free from the Alps to the Adriatic" saw Trieste as a natural – and unredeemed – part of Italy's unified body politic.

town of Rijeka/Fiume), the islands off the coast of Istria and Dalmatia, as well as African colonies (Sluga 2001: 26). After the war, when Slovenes joined the new South-Slavic Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the disputed border area was settled – with crucial input from the international mediators – in favour of the Italian claims, though not nearly to the extent promised by the London Treaty. When the Rapallo Treaty of November 1920 was signed and the Italo-Yugoslav border established, some 350,000 Slovenes and Croats were left to Italy (Velikonja 2003: 87). The whole of Istria and Primorska (Slovene Littoral), including the Karst region that centres on the port of Trieste and the Isonzo valley with its main urban centre in Gorica/Gorizia, were ceded to Italy (Pirjevec 1993: 63). [11] Together with additional territorial losses in Southern Carinthia along the north frontier with Austria, these border adjustments effectively resulted in one third of the Slovenian population remaining outside the newly-formed state (see the map of the region, Appendix A: 259).[12] Kosovel did not mince his words as he reflected on the situation:

> Slovenes are not finding it easy to cope in the midst of this sick European secret diplomacy, which bargains off territories of small peoples, appeasing their dumbfounded looks with the League of Nations, where sit the very people who had sold these territories, the very people who now tyrannise them (CW 3: 40).

The "catastrophic defeat" Kosovel refers to was lent force by the policies of assimilation adopted by Italians towards the Slovene population now living within Italy's borders. In Trieste, as noted by the scholar of Triestine culture Katia Pizzi, "a straightjacket of Italian officialdom was imposed on the city's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity, notably through acts of violence and persecution directed towards the Slovene community" (2001: 243). In 1920, the seat of Slav cultural life, the *Narodni Dom* (National Home), which housed the oldest Slovene bank, the theatre, library, and leisure associations, was torched by a mob with the consent of the Triestine police and authorities. This signalled the beginning of Slav persecution and enforced assimilation, which gained broad legitimacy as fascists came into power in 1922. Policies adopted between 1924 and 1927 "transformed five hundred Slovene and Croatian primary schools into Italian-language schools, deported one thousand 'Slavic' teachers (personified as 'the resistance of a foreign race') to other

[11] Pro-Yugoslav Slovene and Croatian nationalists from Italy founded in 1924 an illegal organization TIGR (acronym for Trieste, Istria, Gorizia, Rijeka), which fought for the annexation to Yugoslavia of South Slav populated Italian territories (Velikonja 2003: n87-88).
[12] For more detail on the historical background to the 1920 plebiscite, cf. Moritsch 1992.

parts of Italy, and closed around five hundred Slav societies and a slightly smaller number of libraries" (Sluga 2001: 48).

Kosovel's family did not remain unaffected by these events. Kosovel's father was forced to retire for refusing to abide by the Italian-only language policy, and was replaced by the more pliant Slovene Ivan Kosmina.[13] This brought the family into severe financial difficulties. Furthermore, they had nowhere to live, as their accommodation came with the father's teaching post. By 1926 non-Italian names had to be Italianized (Srečko, meaning "lucky" became *Felice*; under Austrians he had been *Felix*), and by 1927, soon after Kosovel's death, the use of Slovene was prohibited in public. Slovene newspapers were banned and Slovene political parties dissolved. Many intellectuals and artists went into exile.

Kosovel's elder brother Stano, himself a poet, journalist and editor, suggested that Kosovel was a "refugee" in Ljubljana. When the Italian-Austrian Front opened up in the war, thousands of people were displaced from the villages alongside the frontline and many fled to Ljubljana. The village of Tomaj, however, was never forcefully evacuated, and while when Kosovel came to Ljubljana it was indeed to get away from the frontline, it was also to go to school there. Trieste, which would in any other circumstances have been the obvious choice, was by then much too unsafe. In Ljubljana, he was enrolled in the German medium Realgimnasium (S. Kosovel 1970: 12). Strictly speaking, he was therefore not a refugee, but it is fair to say that Kosovel knew what it meant to be displaced, more acutely so, given his tender age. After 1918, going home for holidays meant crossing the Italo-Yugoslav border, a passage fraught with the risk of not being allowed to return to his studies in Ljubljana. More than a "refugee" then, Kosovel could be seen as a writer in exile. But since Ljubljana, despite his ambivalence towards the city, did become an adopted home evoked by the poet as "the [new] centre of Slovene spiritual life", Kosovel's displacement hints at a more universal writer's condition, one that the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish described as exile beginning inside one's homeland.[14] This complicated sense of belonging and not belonging seems to me to characterize both Kosovel's and Tagore's respective historical experiences, and in

[13] In many instances, criteria other than ethnic such as class or economic came into play, complicating issues of identity. Many upwardly-mobile ethnic Slovenes, for instance, adopted Italian as their first language, setting their class allegiance above their ethnic belonging. See Hametz 2005: 6; Moritsch 1992.

[14] From an interview with the poet in a film portrait of the poet, *Mahmoud Darwish: As the Land is the Language*, directed by Simon Britton and Elias Sanbar, 1998.

both cases, it evolved into a commitment to a world of men and women much larger than any one encapsulated by any geopolitical boundaries.

Italian irredentism was certainly the most threatening manifestation of post-war nationalisms that affected Kosovel's immediate environment. It is indeed the plight of Primorska under Italy as young Srečko experienced it that provides the most relevant backdrop for our analysis seeking to establish Kosovel's sense of identification with Tagore. The context of the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, however, provides another important layer of culturo-political sphere of influence, as Slovenes shifted their orientation from Avstro-Slavism to Yugo-Slavism. It is important to note here the comparison that Michaela Wolf has drawn between the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the Third World colonies' independence from the colonizing powers, stating:

> Decolonization affects both the colonized and the colonizer: both feel fragmented, dismembered, exhausted, inferior and weak. The new situation is marked by ambivalence on both sides. A shared coat, which somehow held together different cultural manifestations, is shed, and both parties must look for a new coat or create a patchwork from the remnants (Wolf 2000: 128).

We will see how fraught Kosovel's search for a new coat became, quite literally, as evinced by his poem "Majhen plašč" ("A Small Coat", Appendix B: 261), as he witnessed the "empty spaces" being filled with "nationalism, fundamentalism and essentialism" (*Ibid.*.), precisely what happened as Italians, Austrians, and Slovenes "awoke" to their exclusive national interests and identities.[15] Social hierarchies notwithstanding, historians have noted a more or less peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups in the urban centres across Central Europe up until the end of the feudal system and the formation of the bourgeois and intellectual classes, as new political subjects were coming of age and began asserting their rights, most often through mobilizing nationalism as a powerful force of self-identification (cf. Pirjevec 1993: 63-65).[16] It is also true that while the various individual national groups under the Austro-Hungarian Empire did not have equal opportunities, the overall cultural climate, as Wolf points out, cannot be compared to that of the "Third World" countries under colonialism (cf. Wachtel 1998:9):

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[15] See Pirjevec for tracing the deterioration of Italian-Slovenes relations.

[16] On the new mode of identification which replaced the traditional identifications on occupational, class or religious basis with the national one in this context, cf. Wachtel 1998: 19-21.

> Under Austrian rule, the various states maintained a large part of their cultural traditions. If literary and artistic productions were censored, overall cultural output was not suppressed or wiped out, as was the case in Latin America and Africa. Consequently, after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the independent countries found themselves in a culturally weakened [...] situation (Wolf 2000: 128).

In the wake of the immanent disintegration of the Empire, as already mentioned, for reasons of protection against Italy and Austria, as well as guarantees of national and cultural emancipation, the Slovenes shifted their orientation towards Yugoslavia. Broadly speaking, there were two strands of Yugoslavism (the Yugoslav idea) that informed the process of nation-building: the so-called "integral" or "assimilative" Yugoslavism, which aimed for a single Yugoslav nation by either denying the separate nationhoods of Slovenes, Croats or Serbs, or by superseding them through an overarching Yugoslav identity, and Yugoslavism which, to quote Rusinow, "acknowledged and approved enduring separate nationhoods and sought federal and other devices for a multi-national sate of related peoples with shared interests and aspirations" (2003: 26). Slovene pro-Yugoslav attitudes largely (but not entirely) rejected the former, and endorsed the second, in line with their so-called "separatist cultural nationalism" essentially based on "the nation's linguistic and cultural uniqueness vis-à-vis other South Slavs, rather than on myths of a glorious past and lost medieval kingdoms" (Wachtel 2003: 246).

In his influential lecture entitled "The Slovenes and Yugoslavs" delivered in Ljubljana in 1913, the foremost modern writer Ivan Cankar (1876-1918),[17] voiced the dominant intellectual stance as regards the desired future as Slovenes envisaged it. While calling for South-Slav unification within a single state, his pro-Yugoslav views were political, rather than cultural. For him "the Yugoslav problem" was exclusively a "political problem." Noting independent cultural lives of respective peoples, he asserted that "some kind of Yugoslav question in the cultural and overall linguistic sense does not exist for me at all" (cited in Wachtel 1998: 86). It was characteristic of Slovenian intellectuals, as Wachtel notes, that they almost always opposed plans for cultural unification or a linguistic and cultural synthesis, believing

[17] In his letters and notes, Kosovel often evokes Tagore alongside Ivan Cankar, or Romain Rolland (1866 - 1944), whose manifesto, "*Déclaration d'independence de l'esprit*" (1919), as already mentioned, Kosovel translated into Slovenian in 1926 (letter to Dragan Šanda, 26/1271924, in Kosovel 2006: 187).

this would lead to the disappearance of their language or Serbo-Croatization of their populace (*Ibid.*).

While not being anti-Yugoslav, and accepting the newly-formed state, within which they were indeed able to set up their own educational and cultural institutions – the Ljubljana University in 1919, the Slovene radio in 1928, and the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1938 – the Slovene intellectuals were at the same time eager to preserve the distinct language and culture (Velikonja 2003: 89). Wachtel even speaks of "Slovenia's more or less isolationist attitude" within Yugoslavia in the interwar period, as shown in the leading cultural periodical of the day *Ljubljanski zvon* ("*The Ljubljana Bell*"), to which Kosovel was also to contribute (Wachtel 2003: 87).

Kosovel's attempts to challenge and break out of cultural isolationalism, also with respect to the artistic currents coming from Belgrade (especially the avant-garde Zenitist movement) as well as his particular treatment of the Slovenian national question must indeed be considered against the dominant climate in which it seemed vital to keep a separate Slovenian identity in order to withhold assimilation. It is also relevant to note here Kosovel's own response to the above questions at a time when the Yugoslav state centralism was gaining the upper hand (to culminate in King Alexander's dictatorship in 1929). Against charges of separatism leveled against Slovene critics of Yugoslav integralism,[18] Kosovel wrote a short essay titled "*Separatisti*" ("Separatists", 1925). Predictably, one might say, we see him stating: "Are a people [automatically] separatist, if they want to live? If they want to develop in their own direction, if they want to crystallize their own body in their own spirit?" (CW 3: 59) But if this is a classical espousal of a separatist cultural nationalism, it must also be acknowledged that Kosovel interrogates the whole notion of "separatism" as it is used in the political discourse, by lodging it in the very human condition: "Man is by his nature a separatist". Kosovel's focus is on the individual rather than a collective:

> You are walking along the street, you meet a friend, who, let us assume, wants to speak to you or feel the warmth of your friendship. Whereas you are not so inclined, in your present mood you know your words would sound too bitter, so you go off on your own to a café, sit alone at a table, read a newspaper, dwell in your own

[18] The term itself and related charges regained political currency after the Second World War at the birth of second Yugoslavia, as Slovene critics of Yugoslav integralism were criticised as "egoists", "traitors", "separatists", "destroyers of Socialist Yugsolavia" etc. (Velikonja 2003: n28, p. 94).

> thoughts and you are, what else – a separatist. Let's say, you are invited to a dance. Though you enjoy watching people having fun [...], you distance yourself. At once you are a dangerous separatist (*Ibid.*).

And he goes on like this. This rather tongue-in-cheek exposition of the individual's right to "separatism" is then, however, finally reconciled in a philosophy that carries an undeniable Tagorean imprint: "We are all walking with different faces, with distinct motivations; each of us has our own way, our own goal, but only seemingly so; in the depth of our souls we are all striving for one thing: harmony [...] Let us be one in spirit and love, but maintain our own faces" (*Ibid.*: 59).

The progression from the individual through the national to the universal is representative of Kosovel's reasoning and is perhaps best encapsulated in these striking words of self-identification: "My life is mine, *Slovenian*, *contemporary*, *European*, and eternal" (emphasis author's, letter to Šanda, 26/12/1924, CW 3: 321). While this trajectory reveals him to subscribe to a "Slovenian" cultural identity aligned with "Europeanness", the "naturalness" of both he at once accepts and interrogates as we shall see, he cannot seem to endorse, for the reasons discussed, a "Yugoslav" one.

However, when Kosovel was presented with the choice of having an Italian passport or a Yugoslav one, he opted for the latter. His newly-accrued citizenship enabled him to apply for a much-wanted and needed scholarship when he was a student at the Ljubljana University from 1922 onwards. His application was unsuccessful, and Kosovel, lashing out at "egocentric centralism", taking in turn "The Greater-Serbian hand [that] has reached as far as our university" and the Slovene political parties that have failed to "defend the university as an apolitical institution" whose task it is to "lay the foundations for the development of humankind, and not one party or one class" (CW 3: 75-6) – was thrown back on his own resources, struggling on the money he earned from giving tuition classes.

It is at such a time, one imagines, that he composed his "prose" poem "*Kruh*" ("Bread"), which is set in the Academic Collegiate of Ljubljana, where he lodged for a while as a student, and where he, it seems, experienced hunger (Appendix B: 262). I read "Bread", in which five young students, one being "a young, dark Bosnian" reading Tagore, and another two being "technicians" and "Slovenes" bent over a technical drawing and all of them receiving light from a single lamp, as a paradigmatic instance of Kosovel signaling beyond the distinctions of peoples, races

and nations to suggest a oneness of humanity (with a nod to Tagore, captured in the reference). For, indeed, the blatantly racial categories ("the dark Bosnian", literarily "black") give way to the mere fact of "*človek*" ("man"; in Slovenian gender is unmarked) or, significantly the pilgrim. The juxtaposition of a "technician" and "Slovenian" aligns nationality with cold mechanisms, a constant theme in Kosovel's work, and the repetition of the word "one" ("one light", "one human being") is in permanent tension with the manifest plurality of the world as this poem is packed with numbers ("24", "five", "eleven", "two"). The forgetting of the pilgrim in the very final line, however, casts a gloomy portent over the human condition.

With this we have more or less sketched the historical backdrop to Kosovel's short life. The shifting political geography of the Adriatic region at once corroborated a sense of national identity and undermined it. The multiple names Kosovel was obliged to adopt as governments changed hands reflect the political and cultural pressures he was under. Similarly, adoption of three passports in so short a life must have thrown the notion of nationality and citizenship as something "natural" or organic to one's identity seriously into question. It is against these forces that we see Kosovel striving to redefine Slovenianness along broadly universalist and humanist lines.

Mental geographies

If we have now covered the complex political geography of Kosovel's life, it remains for us to consider the significant ideological undercurrents, the mental geography, as it were, that powerfully influenced the course of certain historic events. This mental geography – and the focus is now once again on Kosovel's native region of Karst and Primorska – lent legitimacy to the often violent repression of cultural and linguistic difference in the Adriatic border region by drawing on historical perceptions – and representations – of the antithetical notions of "East" and "West" within Europe. In this representational framework, different nationalities were accorded a separate racial status in a hierarchical set-up: "Germans and Italians were regarded as cultural equals: bourgeois, modern, nationally evolved, and essentially Western", and "Slavs were backward peasants, lacking national consciousness, and Eastern" (Sluga 2001: 2). What helped justify and consolidate the Italian claim to authority over the disputed area was their alleged racial, cultural and linguistic superiority. According to an Italian irredentist Virgino Gayda, for example, whose pre-war writings were

published in English and circulated internationally, Slovenes did not have a language, but a dialect. The fact that most Slovene Triestines were bilingual was seen as proof of their cultural backwardness. It pointed to a lack of national consciousness, their meekness, and suggested an essentially assimilatory character that could easily be subsumed into the superior *italianità* (*Ibid.*: 27).

Such valorizations of Italian culture, however, were no irredentist or fascist novelty but were grounded in a tradition of representation going back to the Enlightenment.[19] A host of Western literary and academic writing has over the centuries explicitly generated this bi-polar view of Europe, in which "Eastern Europe" or "the Balkan East" is imagined as the Western half's lesser other. These perceptions influenced political decisions on a number of levels. In relation to the Adriatic question, for example, British diplomats, harbouring notions of the Slav's "doubtful capacity for self-government", readily assented to Italian claims to the territory on grounds of their "cultural and political precedence" (Sluga 2001: 37; 35).[20]

Against this background, informed jointly by concrete historical events and representational practice thereof, broad discursive similarities between Tagore's and Kosovel's respective positions can be discerned. It is becoming clear that they were both projected as members of an inferior and governable race, Indian and (Balkan) Slav respectively. Both were at the receiving end of what Raymond F. Betts has termed "the peculiar geography of imperialism", whereby Western Europe was the centre of the world, "radiat[ing] outward" from its core "those attributes we describe today as 'modern'" (Betts 1998: 7). In short, Indians and Slavs were both perceived as occupants of "the East", and their respective identities were rehearsed through the common stock of racial platitudes (irrational, infantile, incapable of self-rule, lacking national consciousness, backward, and so on) employed to validate the colonial mission on the one hand while bolstering the colonizer's sense of superior self on the other.[21] Not wanting to oversimplify what is indeed much more complex a topic, what is important for us to understand is that it is from this particular historical

[19] For the classical study of this phenomenon cf. Wolff 1994.

[20] Robert Seton-Watson, the founder of the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies, a one-time advisor to the British Foreign Office, and editor of the review *The New Europe*, wrote in one of his articles dealing with the Adriatic question that the region was "a centre of Italian culture and sentiment", and should be assigned to Italy "on moral and spiritual grounds" (in Sluga 2001: 31).

[21] Being an Indian "aristocrat" belonging to an ancient civilization made Tagore acceptable to the British colonizers. He was knighted and awarded the Nobel Prize through British support. Nonetheless, if he refused to toe the line, he was demoted to an Indian "babu".

juncture in which Kosovel and the Slovenes under Italian occupation are culturally and politically oppressed (and ideologically othered) that he sees himself as occupying the same space vis-à-vis the imperial West as Tagore. It is from this positioning that he extends his hand to Tagore in what Boehmer has evoked as "anti-colonial hand-holding" – the resistance that emerges between "others" (Boehmer 2002: 30).

Apart from the fact that in the days of its maritime glory, the city of Trieste was commonly referred to as *la porta d'oriente* – the gateway to the East, for its real contact with the Orient,[22] the category of "East" as popularly understood by Italian Triestines or Western Europeans more generally, resonated with associations of territories and peoples within much closer proximity than the far-off world the city traded with. Often "the East" would be no further away than the rocky escarpment extending above the city known as *Kras* (*Carso* in Italian, and *Karst* in German).The identification of Eastern and/or Balkan Slavs with a backward rural folk as opposed to the modern and urbanized Italians was lent force by the physical geography in which Trieste stood apart from the Slav-populated villages atop the barren limestone plateau overlooking the city. In the wake of political conflicts pre- and post- both world wars, it gave rise to popular anxieties of Slavic invasion from the "barbarous East" – their descent from the mountains, as it were – so that Trieste became seen as the "last bulwark of the West in the face of cultural and psychological anarchies perceived as predominant in an aggressive East" (Pizzi 2001: 157).

Jan Morris gives a vivid voice to these perceptions of the region: "The permanent element of dissent in Trieste [...] its immovable reminder of an alternative world of strangeness, harsh challenge, mystery and unconvention [...] the city's real zone of disorder is the Karst" (2002: 145-6). Savage, dangerous, and set beyond the pale of civilization, the landscape invited associations with places much further removed in geography, but which lent themselves to a similar kind of romanticization or demonization. For example, Elizabeth Burton, the wife and biographer of the British explorer, writer and linguist Sir Richard Burton saw "the wild Karst" as "stony Syria" (cited in McCourt 2000: 30).[23] Today little known, but

[22] Cf. McCourt 2000: 143. Also: "Trieste became Europe's chief point of contact with the Orient, especially after the cutting of the Suez Canal: even the British, when they wanted to reach their Indian empire in a hurry, sent their mail and couriers across the continent by rail to Trieste, to pick up a Lloyd Adriatico packet to the east" (Morris 2001: 175).

[23] Richard Burton was British consul in Trieste between 1872 and his death in 1890. His most celebrated book, the translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1885), was completed in his study in the Opicina/Opčine on the Karstic rim just above the city.

in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century-Trieste a highly influential Jewish writer and journalist, Haydée (Ida Finzi; 1867-1946) would make African colonies and the Karst into interchangeable settings for her novel *Allieve di Quarta: Il Cuore delle bambine* (1922).[24]

Such conflation of categories and settings is commonplace in imperialist attitudes towards their colonies. Certainly, the more entrenched the essentialized perceptions of difference between Italians and Slavs became, the more divisive was the border separating them.[25] The bipolar imaginary of "us" and "them", coupled with a blanket treatment of the "other", presented one of the most formidable challenges to what Tagore and Kosovel both felt was the mission of their age. Tagore often referred to the "question of race pride", regretting the obstacle it presented to mutual cultural exchange. "Can the West fully acknowledge the East? If mutual acceptance is not possible, then I shall be very sorry for that country which rejects another's culture" – he said in an interview with H. G. Wells (2002h: 909). Breaking through racial, cultural, and class divides that shaped perceptions of how people saw each other, Tagore and Kosovel both entertained the possibility of, and strove for, genuine human contact.

As an exemplary *vignette* of one such crossing of boundaries, I want to draw attention to Kosovel's family's relationship with the Italian philosopher, journalist and political scientist, Carlo Curcio, which reminds one of Tagore's many cross-colonial friendships (with William Rothenstein, Edward Thompson, C. F. Andrews and others). Originally from Naples, Curcio was posted as a lieutenant in Dutovlje in 1918, and first met Kosovel's sisters, Karmela and Anica, who came to his Garrison to obtain a border-pass. As these events were related by Anica nearly forty years later in an interview with the Triestine Slovene writer Boris Pahor, the students had come home for a term-break from Ljubljana, but the Italian occupation forces forbade them to return to their studies. The father, she said, became angry with them for having returned, so Anica and Karmela took it upon themselves to resolve the situation and went to the nearest garrison:

> We knocked. Lieutenant was in the room. A young man. And so we began by saying how our father was angry, and that in any case we were students ... And he said: "Gli studenti son il fiore della

[24] For further detail cf. Pizzi 2001: 141-7.

[25] For the history of the extended contact between the Slovenes and Italians in Trieste and the forging of mythologies of "Italian" Trieste and "Slovene" Trieste, see Cattaruzza 1992 and Verginella 2005 respectively.

> nazione." Indeed, we said, and while a brother and one of the sisters are studying in Ljubljana, another sister is visiting the music college Tartini in Trieste [that was Karmela]. So not all "fiori della nazione" are lost. He promised to speak to the general. As we left the Garrison, laughing, we heard footsteps. *Tenente* came after us, wanting to know where we lived. So Karmela and I went off talking about Michelangelo and Raphael, and his eyes lit up with astonishment at what these Karstic people knew. The next day he brought the permits and Karmela played him a piece by Beethoven (in Pahor 1971: 34).

The sisters would then also intervene on behalf of other students, and soon Curcio became a personal friend of the family, coming over to their house on a regular basis, before his service came to an end a year later. Conversations often revolved around literature, and as a farewell present, Curcio gifted the family with the two volumes of Francesco De Sanctis's famous *History of Italian Literature* (1871). He would return to visit them on a number of subsequent occasions and stayed in touch with the family, exchanging many letters and postcards until his death in 1971.

It was in October in 1922 that Kosovel and Curcio met in Ljubljana, where for three days Kosovel was his "tour guide", taking him around the Slovenian metropolis, introducing him to some of the leading artists and intellectuals of the day, including Rihard Jakopič, Izidor Cankar, Josip Vidmar and others. In his correspondence to Curcio, written in French (Kosovel was more versed in French, which he was studying, than in Italian), they discussed national and European problematic, the idealistic strain of philosophy, and Kosovel would critically respond to Curcio's own writings, particularly his essay *L'Ideale della vitta* (The ideal of life). In assessing their relationship, Miran Košuta believes their cross-cultural exchange to have been vital in Curcio's overcoming his early racist attitudes towards the Slavs, and eventually come to defend their cause and uphold every people's right to self-determination (cf. Košuta 2004: 176-83; Rojc 2004:185-9).

Kosovel sustained a link with Trieste throughout the (post-)war years. He was particularly drawn to the important current of international socialism there in the first decades of the twentieth century, mediated to him through his Triestine Slovene friend Vladimir Martelanc, who supplied him also with Marxist literature. Seeing the city regress into crude nationalism and race hatred, he deplored both Italian irredentism and Slavic nationalism. "The heart-Trieste is ill", he would come to write in the lyric "Near Midnight" (Kosovel 2008: 93), and the city's setting became the

locale for his apocalyptic vision expressed in the nine-sequence poem "*Tragedija na oceanu*" ("Tragedy on the Ocean").

In another poem (far less known), entitled "Italian Culture", Kosovel lays out some of his major concerns as regards the national question in almost programmatic fashion. This poem is also interesting for its reference to Gandhi, and shows Kosovel searching for alternative cultural models: as Slovenian cultural institutions were under attack in Trieste, Gandhi was launching his Non-cooperation movement on the Subcontinent in the attempt to oust the British:[26]

> The Slovenian National House in Trieste, 1920.
> The Workers House in Trieste, 1920.
> Wheat fields in Istria on fire.
> Fascist threat during the elections.
> The heart is becoming as tough as a rock.
> Shall Slovenian workers' homes
> continue to burn?
> The old woman is dying at her prayers.
>
> Slovenism is a Progressive Factor.
> Humanism is a Progressive Factor.
> A humanistic Slovenism: synthesis of development.
> Gandhi, Gandhi, Gandhi!
> *Edinost** is burning, burning,
> our nation, choking, choking.
>
> (in Kosovel 2008: 137)

* *Edinost* ("Unity"): a Slovenian political association, a printing press and the name of the main Slovene daily newspaper, published in Trieste, the premises of which were attacked several times by Italian fascists in the 1920s, and finally burnt in 1925.

Lacking verbs, the first two lines give the poem a slow and tortured start. The solid alignment of bare facts, dates, and their repetition, acquires full meaning only with "fascists" in the fourth line. Henceforth the poem gains in speed, as it shifts between despair and hope, ultimately expressing belief in the evolution of the human spirit symbolized in the figure of Gandhi, to land again, less optimistically, on brute facts, this time fleshed out in evocative language. What makes this poem interesting is that the crisis it describes is directed inwards, into, with Ashis Nandy, "self-self" rather than "self-other" debate, or with Edward Said, into an opportunity for a "larger

[26] An article on Gandhi was published in 1922 in the newspaper *Slovenec* (cf. Terseglav 1921). Kosovel may also have read Romain Rolland's book, *Mahatma Gandhi* (1924). His notes reveal that he was planning a lecture on "Tagore and Gandhi: two solutions to the question of nationhood" (CW 3: 746) as part of the activities of the *Literary and Dramatic Club Ivan Cankar*, which he co-founded and ran.

search for liberation". Slovenism, or the idea of Slovenianness, if it is to progress in evolution, needs to be refracted through the prism of humanness, itself subject to evolution. The noun of fascism points to a verb of human intervention whereby, Kosovel urges, national identity must be salvaged from anti-humanist practices. Or, as he wrote to his French teacher Dragan Šanda: "A nation only becomes a nation when it becomes aware of its humanity" (15/09/1925, CW 3: 323-4). Both Kosovel and Tagore believed in the perfectibility of human beings.

The question of Italian dominance was for Kosovel by no means a straightforward issue. In the same way that Tagore, despite the violence and humiliation of foreign rule, refused to succumb to an outright dismissal of everything British or, in turn, an uncritical valorization of everything Bengali/Indian, Kosovel too made it a point to discriminate between imperialist forces that deserve all reprobation on the one hand and Italian culture which may or may not be implicated by these forces on the other. Both strove to override politics in an open acceptance of what they felt was commendable in a given culture, laying themselves open to charges of collaboration with the colonizers.

For all the catastrophic talk that we have noted earlier in Kosovel, he is in fact surprisingly free of resentment towards the Italian oppressors, and he certainly disavows the path of victimhood.[27] While he perceived the "defeat" of 1918 as a "hard blow", in his eyes it was "deserved", a sobering-up of sorts that will jolt the Slovenes out of lethargy and lead to desired emancipation (*CW 3:* 34-5). It is hard to imagine that Kosovel would have, in any degree, accepted the terms of Italy's conquest as a mission to "civilize" and bring order to the "barbaric East", but at the same time his response does reveal the degree to which persistent cultural denigration is internalized by the oppressed, even as it is – and in his case adamantly so – challenged. The trauma of the colonial encounter transpires precisely through his relentless protest against slavish conformism (underpinned by centuries-long history of foreign rule) that he sees as an inherent trait in his countrymen. "We prefer to remain servile and dream," he admonishes them, "rather than live and reign ourselves". Clearly, the notion of servility and alleged incapacity for self-rule (the vocabulary used by imperialists to justify their claim over foreign territories), is here

[27] I entirely agree with Peter Scherber that "It is at first sight astonishing to see [Kosovel] primarily in opposition to his own Slovene compatriots and the Yugoslav politicians, and hardly ever as a critic of the Italian occupiers of his own home territory, the Karst, and the Slovene coastal region" (1991: 157).

subverted into a compulsion for liberation, but clearly too it is impossible for him to go beyond the master–slave dichotomy:

> At a time when we are being lashed by European imperialisms, we are down on our knees, praying to God to grant us our rights and give us righteous masters. And these masters let us have our God but take away all the rights God has given to man (*Ibid.*: 35).

To lodge his call to resistance and liberation, Kosovel builds on the notion of inalienable human rights. A scion of the Enlightenment, he evokes the rights of man as man in a secular sense, which is also an important moment for Tagore's universalism.[28] With energy worthy of Tagore, his artistic temperament finally celebrates the meeting of "East" and "West" and extends the notion of "East" to encompass Asia:

> We happen to be living at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe, on the battlefront of Eastern culture with Western, in an age which is the most exciting and the most interesting in its multiplicity of idioms and movements in politics, economy and art, because our age carries within itself all the idioms of the cultural and political past of Europe and possibly the future of Asia (CW 3: 178).

The reference to Asia is no doubt a direct allusion to Tagore's own understanding of Asia's future relationship with the world, which Kosovel was familiar with from reading Tagore's book *Nationalism* (1917). And the fact that Kosovel saw his own position defined in terms of an "East-West" juncture – at once a point of division and contact – enabled him to relate to Tagore's own project of exploiting the divide for a creative encounter: the forging of a new emancipated individual who would somehow be free of these divisions.

Towards a comparative framework: theoretical precedence

Before going on to explore further the close association Kosovel surmised between himself and Tagore in his quest for (self-)liberation, I should discuss the stretching of

[28] The disputed legacy of the Enlightenment thought has been discussed in chapter one. To avoid the bipolar for-or-against paradigm, it is important to see the Enlightenment's legacy as split between both colonial and anti-colonial agendas: "There are certainly elements of Enlightenment thought in colonial ideology. However, Enlightenment principles also form the basis for a great deal of anticolonial thought and action" (Hogan 2000: 27).

the parameters of colonialism and imperialism so as to encompass geographical spaces that do not fall outside Europe. Within postcolonial studies, Bhabha and Spivak have frequently been singled out as the two theoreticians who have contributed most to extending the explanatory notion of "colonialisation" to cover "all situations of structural domination" (McLeod 2000: 244). My approach does in part rest on such stretching of the vocabulary, whereby Tagore and Kosovel are seen to occupy structurally similar spaces within their respective and distinct historical settings and "colonial" experiences. Both were exposed to forces of cultural domination, whereby one culture was privileged to the exclusion of another (differences are a question of degree but not of principle), and in both cases these forces ultimately failed, as Bengali and Slovenian cultures continued to grow, even flourish as was the case in the "Bengal Renaissance".

With respect to Kosovel it can even be argued that the measures employed in de-nationalizing Slovene (and Croatian) communities within Italian borders were more violent than the policies adopted by the British in India to maintain their cultural supremacy. The latter were possibly more subtle and perfidious, perhaps also more effective. The old saying, however, that the empire is won and maintained by the sword is probably true of all colonial powers wanting to maintain their supremacy (the Amritsar massacre is just one example in the context of Tagore's life).

As much as my analysis rests on the assumption of structural (and discursive) similarities that connect Kosovel with Tagore, this is not in any way to suggest their colonial experiences were identical or that they had affected their cultures in the same way, for clearly they were very different. Italian control over the specified territory and not the entire region of what is today Slovenia lasted a few decades, whereas the British rule over India extended over a period of centuries. (The Austro-Hungarian Empire is a separate issue, which has been touched on earlier.) Then, at least part of the territory subjected to Italianization was mixed and disputed, rather than an unproblematically Italian or Austrian or Slovenian or any other space. There the Slavs had lost their settler status and were perceived mainly as impostors and invaders. Often they were rationalized as being a foreign element introduced by the Austrians for their own political gains vis-à-vis the Italians. Hence they had no territorial rights and could be expelled at a whim. At best they were seen as

"guests".[29] For most Istrians and the Karstic people, on the other hand, who lived in overwhelmingly Slovene (or Croatian) populated territories, the implementation of the Rapallo border that brought those lands under Italian control and occupation army, the experience was arguably worse than colonization.

Both the duration and the nature of colonization as it affected these regions would also help explain why the rich literary cross-over that is so much a part of Indian cultural history and the legacy of colonialism never became a significant part of Slovenian experience. The contact zone from which Kosovel came seems to have been pervaded by so harsh a political conflict that the possibility of an unencumbered cultural exchange – of which he, like Tagore, was a powerful advocate – was severely impaired. Literary historian Franc Zadravec has shown that of all romance-language literatures (Italian, French, and Spanish), Slovenes have responded least heartily to the Italian body of literature in spite of Slovenia's closest geographic proximity to Italy. His conclusion, which confines itself to an analysis of translated foreign literary works and their evaluation in the Slovenian press between 1918 and 1948, leaves little doubt as to the reasons behind this cultural impasse:

> The cause for what is undoubtedly a cold reception of Italian literature [in Slovenia] was not just its recession in the time of fascism, but above all Italian colonial de-nationalizing policy over a significant portion of occupied Slovenian territory. [I]t was marked by a revolt against the haughty pose of the Roman she-wolf who was gifting the "barbarians" with her culture, while stifling their own, as she was stifling their language (1974: 82).

The tone of this particular passage in what is elsewhere a sober and detached scholarly analysis is proof enough of the continuing troubling impact of this episode of Slovenian history on the Slovenian psyche.[30]

Applying the postcolonial theoretical paradigm to political and literary spaces within Europe itself is hardly a novel proposition and has figured significantly over the last few decades in the fields of Central, East European and Balkan studies,

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[29] "Although Slavs were historically resident in the area, there was a widespread tendency to perceive the Slovene community as foreign and intrusive: in the dialectic insiders versus outsiders, Slav populations were frequently and literally represented as a *disease* attacking the healthy body if *italianità*" (Pizzi 2001: 186). Cf. Sluga 2001: 27-33.

[30] One is, of course, made to wonder, whether this could be a blind spot on the part of Slovenian scholarship, similar to the implicit or explicit denial of the impact of the Soviet centre on the postcolonial cultures of Central and East Europe that Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek has observed in the intellectuals of the region, who, on the other hand, accept the influence of a Western centre such as Germany as a given. See 2002: 11.

though as far as postcolonial studies go, Eastern Europe, alongside East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, is still a neglected area of enquiry.[31] The Balkan strain, in particular, has been most directly indebted to the premises outlined in Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978). Vesna Goldsworthy, for example, imports the Saidian critique practically wholesale as she analyzes literary constructions of the Balkans in British fiction in her study entitled *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998). Others, most notably Maria Todorova, are more cautious in adopting the Orientalist model. While acknowledging the underlying pertinence of Said's theoretical vocabulary for the region, her study *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) proposes a new discursive category, "Balkanism", so as to foreground the geographical, cultural and political specificities of the region, which preclude any unqualified parallelisms.

While Goldsworthy has made a convincing case for saying that "the Balkans" have imaginatively been functionalized as the "Orient" of Europe,[32] perhaps her too exclusive a reliance on Said leads her to take too little cognizance of a crucial point as regards the Balkans, namely, their liminal status. The fact that the Balkans are located *within* Europe, a status often only grudgingly accorded them by economically superior western-European powers, makes them, as it were, an *internal* "Other". Marked thus by duplicity of status as simultaneously an insider and an outsider, the Balkans, itself a shifting category, fall subject to a complex self-referentiality that is arguably quite different to "conventional" colonization. Nonetheless, "[t]o view the relationship between Western Europe and the Balkans as homologous to colonialism is an approach that, if used with reason (and if historicized), has validity and can be fruitful" (Fleming 2000: 1221).

If the symbolic geography that is being interrogated by the Balkan studies relates primarily to the geographical region that was historically under the Ottoman rule – "the Balkans, either Byzantine or Ottoman, represented a cultural and religious 'Other' to Europe 'proper'" (Bakic-Hayden and M. Hayden 1992: 3) – then its relevance to our area of enquiry is arguably only indirect or itself liminal. And yet, the perpetuated symbolic geography of "eastern inferiority" has affected – differently and at different times – both spaces, and the liminal status where "eastern" is

[31] A scheduled conference at the University of York, UK, 3-5 July 2010, "What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say?" aims to address also this neglected area of inquiry. Email correspondence with Diana Brydon, 12/16/09.

[32] Goldsworthy speaks of "imaginative, textual colonization" in relation to the Balkans, acknowledging the absence of a "fully-fledged conventional imperialism" (1998: 211).

employed antithetically to the noun "Europe" has also had bearings on the Italian-ruled inter-war region of Primorska as it has done on "the Balkans". Significantly too, the orientalist framework has played a prominent part in Slovenian political and intellectual discourses in the more recent history to demarcate their own "superiority" or "Europeanness" vis-à-vis the rest of "the Balkans".[33] Though this is a matter for a different, if not irrelevant, discussion, it alerts us powerfully to the shifting line of exclusion and inclusion that underlies the symbolic map of Europe. Bakic-Hayden and M. Hayden note the existence of a hierarchical axis in the European symbolic geography, which can be seen as "declining in relative value from the north-west (highest value) to the south-east (lowest value)". They propose a "system of 'nesting' orientalisms", in which, "in terms of distinguishing disvalued Others [...], there exists a tendency for each region to view cultures and religions to the south and east of it as more conservative or primitive" (*Ibid.*: 4).

This differentiated, fluid map of perceptions and constructions of Europe is essential here. The theoretician of Central and Eastern European cultures, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, has been a proponent of the applicability of the postcolonial studies model within Europe itself,[34] but he has fine-tuned the center/periphery and center/margin notions with respect to the existing internal economic, political and cultural hierarchies:

> In reality, there are several centers, France, Germany, and there are "near centers" such as Italy, the Benelux, the Nordic countries, etc., and these centers reflect economic and political power. And then there are several peripheries such as Southern and East Europe, Portugal, the Baltic countries, etc. In this differentiated view of Europe, Central and East Europe comprises the successor states of the Austrian empire and beyond, with their Austro-German and German economic, cultural, political, etc., spheres of influence. In general social discourse as well as in scholarship, Central and East European cultures, owing to their situation of peripherality, need to proclaim within Europe that they are Europeans and that they belong to Europe while the sliding scale of cultural hierarchies based on economic realities from West to Central and to East Europe remains an established practice although more implicit than explicit, yet practised rather than admitted and discussed (Tötösy 2002: 8-9).

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[33] See the article referred to for further discussion of the exceptionalist, orientalist discourse of Slovene politicians and intellectuals to justify their split from Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

[34] What lends his postcolonial approach "factual" credence is the four-decade-long condition of "Soviet colonialism" exercised over a large part of Central and Eastern Europe. Although the former Yugoslavia was never part of the Soviet Empire, what validates Tötösy's novel approach as regards Kosovel is the fact of Italian occupation combined with the region's peripheral status perceived as the divide between Europe's Eastern and Western halves.

In historicizing the region with respect to its many political, economic and cultural centres, Tötösy extends the vocabulary of centre/margin through the category of "in-betweenness". The sliding scale of cultural hierarchies along the West-Central-East geographical and economic axis positions these cultures in between their own "self-referential national culture" (that in reality is never as homogenous as proclaimed) and the various other centres or sources of influence (*Ibid.*: 12). It is precisely this liminal status of "the peripheral subject" – a subject that is yet to claim its "European" status from the margin position of an "inside other" – that has endowed Kosovel with the double perspective of questioning while asserting, or rather asserting *through* questioning, his own Slovenian and European culture and identity.

Making connections

Let us recapitulate the main points made in relation to Kosovel's background from which he derived a sense of shared concerns with Tagore. We have dwelt on the embattled history of the Adriatic Region and Trieste, for the reason that it was Trieste, in many ways a city the poet felt more at home in than in Ljubljana (Rojc 2005: 67), that sensitized young Srečko to models of subjective identification that could either accommodate difference (the city before the war was a place where diverse nationalities and groups were able to share the same territory without conflict) or violently repress it (as was the case once the city and its environs were designated as exclusively Italian and assimilation became the order of the day).

The post-war situation (aggravated also by centralising tendencies of the new state and Germanization pressures to the north) alerted Kosovel in a most powerful way to the pathology of nationalism and the raising of barriers along ethnic lines, where being Italian, Austrian, Slovene or other, overrode notions of a shared human identity or precluded the possibility of hybrid or multiple identities. His task became twofold: to show that "nationalism was a lie" (CW 2: 31) – and in this he was as passionate as Tagore – and to salvage the concept of *narod* (a people/nation) from being hijacked by nationalism: "A *narod* for us can only ever mean a nation which has freed itself from nationalism" (emphasis author's, CW 3: 624).

Straddling the cusp of Europe where the European "East" and "West" faced, and drew from, each other, burdened with the antithetical notions on the one hand,

and animated through diverse social and cultural forms on the other, Kosovel could understand both the violence of the colonial encounter based on the binaries of imperial imagination, and the opportunities that came with cross-cultural contact. That he was able to see and feel also beyond the geographic confines of his immediate environment is borne out not just through his reading and appreciation of Tagore, but through his explicit reaching out to the and the suppressed the world over. "Injustice is injustice, whether suffered by one, thousands or millions" (CW 3: 48). The plight of Primorska he would align in his writing with the "unnatural act" he saw in the "colonisation of non-European lands" (*Ibid.*: 65-6).[35] If the suffering of his own people was a symptom of global social forces, namely those of capitalist Europe with its imperial onslaught on Asia and Africa (*Ibid.*: 31), and a world outlook promoting sharp distinctions between races and civilizations, then, Kosovel felt, the solution too had to be sought across the world in a new social order:[36]

> No one will help us, if we do not help *ourselves*, but help *ourselves* is not enough. It is only in a mighty phalanx of all who are suppressed that our salvation lies. Only those who are suppressed can feel and create new justice, a new world built for Man (emphasis author's, *Ibid.*: 49).

As we read this, we are reminded of the more famous postulation made by Frantz Fanon in the wake of African decolonization of the 1950s and 60s, namely, that humanity, somehow, belongs to the oppressed. "When I search for Man in the technique and style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders", wrote Fanon towards the end of *Les damnés de la terre*, 1961 (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1968), to voice an appeal which at once counteracts and draws on the failed or unfinished project of the Enlightenment: "Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth" (*1963: 252). A proponent of "a new humanism", this Martinique-born psychiatrist who joined the Algerian war of liberation, wanted to do away with, as shown in chapter one, the "absurd drama others have staged round me" and "reach out for the universal [...] through one human being" (Fanon 1986: 197). It is impossible here

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[35] "Millions of people are suffering in colonies, in occupied territories, there are millions belonging to national minorities who are groaning under the steel heel of European capitalism [...] They are our brothers, even though we don't know them, even though they might be Italians or Hungarians or Slovenes or Germans or Serbs" (Kosovel CW 3: 71).

[36] It is in Kosovel's reaching out to the rest of the world that I see in him an ideational precursor of the Non-Aligned Movement.

not to think of Kosovel's own evocation of such "one Man" in a manifesto he wrote in 1925. Entitled "*Mehanikom*" ("To the Mechanics"), this manifesto is perhaps the most cogent expression of Kosovel's universalist ethos:

> Dawn is breaking! Can you feel the shimmer? There are no more peoples, no nations, no humanity. There is one Man standing in the centre of the world [...] One Man, and everyone around him is his different faces. (Is he a miner, a tanner, a docker, a peasant, a functionary, a writer, an intellectual or a beggar, I cannot make out. Is he a Slovene, a German, a Russian or a Frenchman, I do not know, I know only that I am awfully fond of this Man, whoever he is, whatever he is (CW 3: 114).

Kosovel's "one Man" could very well be the Fanonian "whole man", healed of the Manichean split produced by racial imagination (imperialist or anti-imperialist). Possibly an interpretational stretch, but once Kosovel is aligned with other thinkers and poets of decolonization – an alignment grounded in the details of his background, his positioning within Europe as an internal "Other", as well as his response to the historical predicament of his people that reaches out to the suppressed the world over – the final two lines of the poem "Black Walls", "Man comes / from the heart of darkness" resonate with a meaning that can only be described as truly "post-colonial", by which I mean going beyond the Manichean division of self and other. If "the heart of darkness" is a trope for Africa, assuming, of course, that Kosovel was referring to Joseph Conrad's novel published in 1902, and by extension to all the wretched of the earth, then it is the task of the downtrodden to give birth to the "whole man" and surpass, or improve on, the claims of Western civilization.

Kosovel certainly saw himself as writing in solidarity with those "intellectuals, famous artists and scientists" within and outside of Europe, who, he felt, had taken up "a relentless fight against injustice and violence" (CW 3: 27). Though Rabindranath Tagore is the only non-European he mentions alongside Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Selma Lagerlöf and Ernst Toller, the signatories of the "*Déclaration d'independence de l'esprit*" (1919), Kosovel's perspective on Europe can be aligned with ideas of liberation shared by many individuals across the colonized world. Often this is not a question of influence or borrowing, or, even, situational identification, but a question of a parallel voicing of ideas against the backdrop of similar colonial dialectics.

I have stressed the links and associations which extend Kosovel's vision beyond the borders of Europe to suggest that Kosovel's poetry is part of a more complex, global configuration of anti-imperial politics and ethics.[37] Seeing Kosovel as someone who on the back of his culturo-historical predicament addressed themes and problems of global relevance, allows us to appreciate his work in a new light. New accents and even concerns begin to emerge if we put Kosovel in the context of some major poets of resistance and decolonization, or poets of liberation. Focusing on issues such as language, representation, resistance, migrancy, modernity and nationalism – all central to postcolonial literatures – point to ways in which his poetry can be meaningfully interpreted. My line of questioning, while acknowledging the pertinence of all these issues, and their interrelatedness, focuses primarily on the subject of nationalism and national/cultural identities, and more precisely on their conjunction with universalism, at which point a nationalist discourse gives way to a post-nationalist perspective.

To clarify and expand on this last point, I want to bring in the concept of "antitheticality" that Hazard Adams developed with respect to W. B. Yeats's notoriously elusive nationalist position, and which has relevance for both Kosovel's and Tagore's post-nationalist orientations. Adams says that the Irish poet's nationalism was "from beginning to end *antithetical* in the sense of critical opposition to forms of nationalism that tended toward superficiality and suppression" (emphasis mine; 1991: 165). It was essential for Yeats and his conception of art that the poet "remain *in opposition*" (emphasis author's, 169). If there are two obvious sides that engage a given culture's passions, of which one is privileged over the other (English over Irish, body over soul, West over East, centre over margin), to be in opposition in the antithetical sense does not mean to reverse the dyad and oppose just one side of the contrariety, but to stand against the opposition itself. At the same time, however, an antithetical stance proper must not, Adams argues, triumph over the opposition, for this would merely create a new suppression. The point is to maintain "continual active tension with the negations current in the culture" (164).

For Tagore as well as Kosovel there were always three sides to every argument. In his poem "Italian culture", which we have discussed, Kosovel does not commit the negation of one side of the opposition between Italians and Slovenes, but aims to get outside the opposition itself. The contrariety, however, is maintained, as passions and differences cannot be ignored or levelled out, but the possibility of a

[37]This politics is itself a prehistory of postcolonial academic discipline. Cf. Gandhi 2007.

third position is held forth in what Kosovel refers to in the poem as a "progressive factor" in an on-going, never finished "development".

Both Tagore and Kosovel (like Fanon) were aware of the danger of simply reversing existing dichotomies and therefore looked to antithetically oppose them through understanding the complex nature of cultural identities and their interdependencies. In this both thinkers sought to transform anti-colonial dissent into a creative project of liberation, with emphasis on creativity rather than (national) authenticity. Instead of espousing an uncritical return to the "pre-colonial" past, they adopted a rhetoric of futurity which allowed them to imagine, as Tagore would put it, the "dawn of a new era, when man shall discover his soul in the spiritual unity of all human beings" (2001: 455). That this utopian perspective informed Tagore's very practical answers has been discussed in detail, and that the same can be said of Kosovel will be seen once we come to look at his practical activities as well.

Turning "East"

In an elegy for W. B.Yeats, W. H. Auden wrote "mad Ireland hurt you into poetry" (1991: 248). Had he written an elegy to Kosovel, who died at the age of twenty-two, he might have said "mad Europe hurt you into poetry". Kosovel's Europe, "the madhouse of rational spirits", "the madhouse of civilization and hyper-intellectualism", was in deep crisis, and her crisis, the anguished poet cried from the rooftops, was "a crisis in humanity" (CW 3: 27). This is neither a surprising nor unique response from a poet writing against the climate of the First World War, the shock of which administered a severe blow to the already crumbling edifice of the old world, reinterpreted through thinkers like Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. Artists and poets were responding to a whole complex of forces, as they obsessed over what felt like "the end of a phase of human experience" (Hough 1991: 317). Theirs was a reality profoundly unsettled through scientific discoveries, technological change, industrial revolution, changing global relations, volatile cosmopolitanism – a general upheaval going back to the nineteenth century, underpinned by imperialisms's first and subsequent global crisis. The scale of human destruction wrought by the war only exacerbated a compounding sense of doom, and the myth of civilization and progress, upon which the age of imperialist expansion rested, became harder to

uphold once the European peoples had turned also against each other.[38] The historian John Lukacs writes:

> By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the number of thinkers who, directly or indirectly, began to question this kind of progressive optimism increased. They had their forerunners such as the Neapolitan Vico two centuries earlier; but now there were different writers, such as Nietzsche or Valery or Spengler, who, in their different ways, tried to remind their readers of the symptoms of decline and of the ultimate fallibility of Western civilization (2002: 8).

Lukacs correlates this new climate of the West's self-questioning with the gradual coming to an end of what he dubs "the European Age", and it is not irrelevant to bear his geo-political sketch of the rise and fall of the European age in mind, in view of our next step, which is to consider the artistic proclamations of the death of Europe (and the demise of the West) of the same period. The term "the European Age" serves to designate the dominant self-perceptions of Europeans, the rise and fall in their confidence related to their corresponding status as a political actor in the global theatre. Interestingly enough, the word "European" (in the sense of defining the inhabitant of a continent) came into currency coextensively with colonial expansion. So, the beginnings of "the European Age" are predictably located in the year 1492 with the "discovery (*sic*) of the Americas". Over the next five hundred years, "the posts and colonies of the European Powers appeared across the world" taking with them their "European institutions, customs, industries, laws [and] inventions". By 1914 "the entire continent of Africa, save for two states, Liberia and Abyssinia, belonged to or was governed by a European colonial empire. Eighty years later, there was not a single European – or white-ruled – state on the entire continent". Following the two world wars, Europeans gave up their colonies and left their erstwhile "African and Asian homelands". While European institutions, Christian churches, industries, and forms of art and expression survived "the reflux of whites", the European Age was by then pretty much over. It was finished by 1945 (as the United States and Russia became the two world Superpowers facing each other across the "the middle of conquered Europe"), if not already, the author contends, by 1917 (*Ibid.*: 10-11).

If the shattering of the myth of "Western civilization" rests on the global historical transformation climaxing in two events: the outbreak of the First World

[38] For further socio-historical context, cf. Hobsbawm 1995:178-99; for the more specific culturo-historical background to European modernism, cf. Bradbury and McFarlane 1991; McFarlane 1991.

War, and the Russian Revolution of October 1917, it is not surprising then that the turn of the twentieth century and the decades following are a period in which any number of writers worldwide can be seen to proclaim a crisis or death of Europe. While in the late twenties, Tagore would still say that "Europe today is the predominant factor in the human world" to regret the fact that "she has come to the East, not with an ideal, but with an object that primarily concerns her own self-interest" (16/09/1927, in Dutta and Robinson eds. 2005: 352), his most uncompromising attack on the "Western civilization" and prognostication of its demise was penned decades earlier, in fact on the last evening of the nineteenth century (the poem will be discussed shortly).

It is indeed the case that "poetry can be a bellwether, a signifier of change, long before the change has registered its presence in political or economic spheres" (Mehta 2004: 9), as it is also true that the suggestive nature of poetic language captures the mood of any historical moment possibly with greater immediacy than any other discourse. To read W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" (1919) written just after the Russian Revolution and before the Irish Civil War, or Georg Trakl's "*Abendland*" (translated as "Occident",[39] the word referring to Western European nations) written in the last months before the poet committed suicide in 1914, is to get a lived sense of a vision of an end to a civilization, portended by an approaching rough beast in the former and the descending night in the latter.

This elemental dialectic between death and regeneration seems to have guided the imagination of many poets of the pre- and post- World War I era. It would be wrong of course to assume any kind of uniformity in their responses, even as we identify certain common traits, motivations or themes (such as Europe's death). Nor should we commit the Eurocentric mistake and confine "the sense of an ending", to borrow Frank Kermode's phrase, as something belonging exclusively to Western literary modernism, in itself a phenomenon with a pronounced international base and orientation, indebted to world-wide cultural and aesthetic influences (Boehmer 2002: 123-4). For indeed, the conventional art-historical narratives that trace the "'poetics' of internationalism" to the trenches of the First World War to then equate it with European twentieth-century avant-gardes, overlook the fact, as pointed out by Neil Larsen, that pre-imperialist, not to mention pre-capitalist societies had all spawned their own cosmopolitan and international aesthetic cultures. They also forget to ask:

[39] For Michael Hamburger's English translation, cf. Miller and Watts (eds.) 2003: 76-7.

"Are Picasso and Breton the redeemers of art after 1914 rather than, say, Diego Rivera and Tagore?" (Larsen 2000: 31).

Bringing Tagore and Kosovel into this discussion from their respective global margins (Kosovel's writing from the periphery of Western Europe and Tagore's from the overseas colonial empire) will lead us to explore what Timothy Brennan too has observed is still an under-acknowledged link between the inter-war avant-gardes, the colonies and anti-imperialist consciousness (Brennan 2002: 185-203).[40] It is here that the year 1917 – the watershed date for the end of "the European Age" – enters as a crucial marker of "a broader culture of anti-imperialism" (*Ibid.*: 196). If one event could be singled out as *the* event in eliciting a response from intellectuals across the political spectrum, left or right, apart from World War I, it was the October Revolution of 1917 (*Ibid.*: 192; Williams 1989: 60). Deeply responsive to the social and political forces of the age, the avant-gardes, broadly defined by one theorist as "an intellectual movement" or "the action of the intelligentsia" (Szabolcsi 1971: 57), played a prominent part.

In that sense, Lukacs' "European Age" and the demise thereof can be seen as an emerging postcolonial space in which the age of imperialism came into direct confrontation with the age of the proletariat. Certainly for those writers who took on the civilizational crisis in anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist terms, the Bolshevik revolution offered a realistic hope (however short-lasting) for the ideal of a new classless society. Moreover, it unleashed what Timothy Brennan has argued was "a full-blown *culture* of anti-imperialism for the first time" (emphasis author's, 2002: 191).

In wanting to reinstitute interwar Marxism with the recognition it deserves as a precursor to postcolonial studies – for the parents to reclaim their orphaned child, as it were – Brennan submits that "the Russian Revolution [...] was an anticolonial revolution". This he takes to mean in "its sponsorship of anticolonial rhetoric" which "thrived in the art columns of left newspapers, cabarets or the political underground, mainstream radio, the cultural groups of the Popular Front, Bolshevik theater troupes", meeting with responses and contributions from "the various avant-garde arts" (*Ibid.*: 192). Referring to the more dissident wings of European thought, Brennan gives ample evidence to counter the claim that anti-imperialist theory arose only after the Second World War. Even activist writers such as Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, the most formidable anti-imperialist voices of the nineteen-fifties

[40] Cf. Clarke 1997: 101.

and sixties, belong to the lineage that is, the author maintains, a "direct product of interwar Marxism". But it was:

> [...] especially (and significantly) the Marxism of the Eastern periphery of Europe that played the largest role in nudging intellectuals into a liberatory view of non-Western societies between 1905 and 1939 [...] It was not the Frankfurt school but cultural Bolshevism and the larger networks of fellow travellers it spawned that made possible the early twentieth-century sensitivities towards colonial oppression (*Ibid.*: 190).

Locating the epicenter of anticolonial sentiment in the Russian revolution, the aftershocks of which were felt throughout the world (cf. Hobsbawm 1994: 65-6), Brennan cannot overstate the implications of the revolution for the "the idea of the West". It "delivered Europe", he says, "into a radical non-Western curiosity and sympathy that had not existed in quite this way before". It "altered European agendas and tastes by situating the European in a global relationship that was previously unimaginable" (*Ibid.*: 192-3).

If we now think back to Kosovel's sympathetic gesturing towards the non-Western world and recall his staunch anti-imperialist stance (corroborated, no doubt, by his direct experience of colonial domination at the hand of a Western imperial power), his fascination with Tagore assumes a logic and relevance that is part of a larger framework than the one so far suggested by his situational identification with the Indian poet. It stems from a particular moment of history when "a distant, instinctive reaction to the colonies" (*Ibid.*: 195) was inscribed, as it were, into the very logic of the social, political and artistic forces fuelling that moment. What, more precisely, is the logic that connects the proletarian revolution and the anti-imperialist energies, the outcome of which was a "de-centering" of Europe, will be considered next.

While historians have pointed out that the imperial enterprise of the interwar years seemed for the most part quite secure, and for most people of Western imperialist nations "it was just there" either as "a source of national pride [...] a source of entertainment [or] a source of tales of daring", there was now "a small but vocal number of individuals" who profoundly questioned the world order, challenged the conceits associated with the alleged civilizing mission of the colonisers, and cast in doubt the civilization that made it possible (Betts 1998: 10-17). In this respect, as already mentioned, the Russian revolution, Communism and the Third International or Comintern (1919), were all a vital source from which the historical lesson in self-

liberation appeared to flow. But the idea of social revolution was now combined with anti-imperialist thought. This was because the notion of imperialism came to stand in for "forceful domination", derived from the analogy made between the capitalist's exploitation of the worker and imperialist's exploitation of the colonized:

> Imperialism, in this global scheme of things, was rapacious capitalism expanded overseas in a desperate search for new markets and resources to command, other people to oppress, all motivated by the desire for investment opportunities and subsequent profit (*Ibid.*: 13).

Within such a framework, anticolonial or anti-imperialist protest is but an extrapolation of the Marxist critique of capitalism, the twin logic of which was compellingly elucidated by Vladimir Lenin in his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1920). For indeed, in this treatise, "Lenin assumes the social standpoint of those whom modern capitalism as a world system most exploits and oppresses, even when they are not "proletarian" in a conventional sense" (Larsen 2000: 29).[41]

When Kosovel pondered the irony of the situation in which Slovenes had achieved a historically unprecedented measure of political autonomy (within the newly established Kingdom), only to come, in a substantial segment of their population, under a new threat from their neighbours, he was distraught to consider that his people "might die", as he put it, "in the last hours of capitalist imperialism" (CW 3: 39). From this formulation, it is evident that he subscribed to a Leninist view of imperialism. Furthermore, in his essay titled "*Kriza*" ("Crisis", 1925) he motivated the new developments in the arts with the new consciousness arising out of the realization of the horrors of imperialist wars:

> Amidst the expectations of war, new art was born. Amidst the eerie silence already betraying bloodshed, it was born. Amidst the eerie silence which was all along a mercantile war. Amidst malicious calculations that went after profit and not people (CW 3: 12).

Profit over people, to use a Chomskian phrase,[42] was for Kosovel at the root of Europe's spiritual and moral crisis, which had forsaken human values in its greed for

[41] Larsen too argues here, like Brennan, that the genealogical centrality of Lenin's treatise must be recognized for postcolonial studies.
[42]From Noam Chomsky (1999), *Profit over People*, Seven Stories Press, 1999

riches and power. If the Great War was its disastrous outcome, leading to "chaos, anarchy, nihilism" and overall "moral depression" (*Ibid..*), then it was up to "us" to reclaim our lost humanity and clamber out of what Kosovel elsewhere referred to, more poetically, as "a negative total" (Appendix B: 263). It also put "man" at the heart of his evocations in poetry and confronted art with a new set of questions, which effectively meant breaking with tradition and traditional representation in art. In a similarly titled piece "Crisis in Civilization" (1941), written over a decade later, as the world was collapsing into another world war, Tagore too, writing against a like climate of disillusionment and depression, spoke of "the new dawn [coming] from the East" when "unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage" (1961m: 359).

When Kosovel turned towards "East" for inspiration, which he readily did, it was with the same kind of idealistic fervour with which he anticipated a "new morning", but his "new morning" – it must be noted – would come "in a red coat", hence its irradiating core was Russia and not, in the primary instance, "the East" of Tagore (CW 3: 93). And yet, of course, the two were closely related. Having taken a lesson from Brennan's recovery of anti-imperial intellectual history of the interwar years and its close links with the Russian revolution (its promise of a new, non-exploitative social order), and having shown anti-imperialism to have been conflated with anti-capitalism, it becomes possible to make sense of the close alliance between what motivated Kosovel's artistic expression, his "revolutionary" (but non-Party) poetic and social(ist) avant-gardism, and his immediate response to Tagore – the writer he pressed his colleagues to read as a guiding light in those tumultuous times. Indeed, Kosovel perceived in Tagore a spiritual and intellectual kin, hence he co-opted him into the ranks of those "intellectuals, famous artists and scientists" that had "joined the proletarian movement" (CW 3: 27). Under the broad concept of "a 'revolutionary' world *aesthetic* – as opposed to a tradition, canon or culture", posited by Larsen as a corrective to the more parochial and regionally bounded conceptions of the avant-garde, the new (anti)imperialist internationalism subsumed "both proletarian and all-purpose liberal-humanist" forms (emphasis author's, 2000: 31).

At some non-literalist level, in co-opting Tagore into the ranks of the "proletariat", Kosovel was in fact not off the mark, for in the way that he himself took inspiration from Russia – sceptical of its emerging "political dictatorship of the Bolsheviks", but full of praise for its vast and consistent efforts to bring education and culture to the Russian people (*Ibid..*) – was not at all dissimilar to Tagore's

response to Russia in 1930, when he visited the country, coming away impressed with the Soviet education system and the self-respect it brought to the peasant and the worker, but doubtful about the political direction it was taking (cf. Tagore 2002e).

Perhaps the principal importance of Tagore for Kosovel lay in the fact that here was a voice from outside Europe, grappling with similar issues but articulating an alternative viewpoint, and offering what the historian of Chinese science Joseph Needham, years later, formulated into a rationale:

> It is necessary to see Europe from the outside, to see European history, and European failure no less than European achievement, through the eyes of that larger part of humanity, the peoples of Asia (and indeed also of Africa) (1956, cited in Clarke 1997: 107).

To show the relevance of the foregoing for Kosovel's creative work, I now turn to his critique of Europe as expressed in his poem "Ecstasy of Death" (1925), considered to be one of the finest specimens of expressionist lyrics written in the Slovene language, and one of the few poems that Kosovel published during his lifetime.[43]

Interrogating "Europe"

The poem "Ecstasy of Death" (Appendix B: 264) can be said to belong to a series of Kosovel poems that take up the theme of Europe and pit it against the prophetic evocations of its death and rebirth.[44] Clearly, this was a theme that preoccupied the young poet enormously. This particular poem has been unanimously greeted as Kosovel's most successful treatment of the subject, executed in the predominantly expressionist vein (particularly the more abstract revolutionary and messianic strain of Expressionism registered the sense of disenchantment with the Western/modern civilization in stark apocalyptic terms). While critics have analysed the poem in detail within the European sphere of influence, none have so far taken it beyond its immediate context to consider it against the wider background sketched above.[45] I

[43] Published in *Ljubljanski zvon* in 1925, and republished in 1946 in the first volume of the collected works, pp. 307-8.
[44] Some others include "Our Eyes", "Europe is Dying", in Kosovel 2008: 104; 105 and "Heartless People", "Destructions", in Kosovel 1998: 114; 115.
[45] To date, Kosovel's poetry has been considered in the context of European Avant-gardes (Pokorn 1998; Vrečko 2005), more precisely: German Expressionism (Legiša: 1969; Kralj 1986), Italian

see value in pursuing the latter analysis, based on three interrelated observations which have guided my discussion so far. First, that Kosovel was writing under pressures (and dilemmas) pertaining to a culture dominated by another and therefore shared some of the intellectual and artistic concerns characteristic of the colonized world. Second, that Kosovel's liminal status within Europe gave him a predilection, if not a privilege, to see "Europe" from both within and without. And third, that he wrote in the atmosphere of post-World War I and post-Russian revolution, which in itself was charged with a much broader and more critical inquiry into Europe's imperialist politics than seems to be conventionally recognised. These separate threads are brought together in concrete textual evidence as Kosovel's poem can be seen to correspond, suprisingly directly in parts, with Tagore's own writings and critique of Western politics of domination. In other words, "Ecstasy of Death" is an anti-imperialist, or indeed, liberational, poem which resonates powerfully with other anti-imperialist writings of Asia and Africa that both precede and follow it. By reading it alongside Tagore's poem "The Sunset of the Century" (1899), his collection of essays *Nationalism* (1917) and, for example, Aimé Césaire's indictment of Europe in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), I hope to reinstitute it to its wider historical context from which it has arguably emerged.

In a mixture of grotesque imagery and romantic flight, set to the harrowing beat of the leading lines "All is ecstasy, the ecstasy of death", this poem pronounces a death sentence upon a civilization that is already seen to be in rapid decline. A Spenglerian vision unfolds, as "golden towers of Western Europe" and the "white domes" of civilization topple over and drown in "the burning, red sea" of the setting sun. This last metaphor intriguingly echoes Tagore's "blood-red clouds of the West" of his poem "The Sunset of the Century", itself a chilling sentence upon the West that has made "the world its food" and is now engulfed by the "funeral pyre" of its own destruction, "dead under its own excess". Similar overlap in imagery between the two poems can be detected in the next line in which Kosovel's European is seen to be intoxicated in the bath of the falling sun and Tagore's West caught up in a "drunken delirium of greed". The frenzied language of consummation, intoxication, fiery disarray, are inherent to both poems, perhaps even more pronounced in Tagore

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Futurism (Troha 1988; 1993), Balkan Zenitism and Russian Constructivism (Zadravec 1966; Pogačnik 1984; Flaker 1984; Bajt 1985; 1986; Vrečko 1986; Ocvirk 2003 [1967]), and in relation to the Polish avant-garde (Tokarz 2004).

than Kosovel, with clear thematic and stylistic echoes, though the two poems also significantly depart from each other. But let us deal with "Ecstasy" first.[46]

The sun is about to set on the continent and Europe, "a luxuriant queen dressed in gold", is ready to close her golden eyes, as everything either turns into blood or is coloured by it. Blood, the speaker of the poem says, "spills into [his] tired heart". Clouds rain blood. Europe has no more water, so people drink blood. No one, it seems, is unaffected by, or exempt from, this terrible blood-bath:

> Just born, and already you burn in the fire of evening,
> all seas are red, all seas
> full of blood, all lakes, and no water,
> no water for this human to wash his guilt,
> to wash his human heart,
> no water to quench his thirst
> for the quiet, green morning land.
>
> All is evening, and morning won't come
> until we all die who carry the guilt of dying,
> until we all die
> to the last.

The sense of guilt looms singularly large as blood and water come to represent guilt (inherited or inherent?) and redemption, and evening and morning to symbolise death and regeneration. The pronouncement is harsh: "Europe", to borrow from Césaire, "is indefensible", for colonization, let it be clear, is not civilization, but "the principal lie" from which all others stem.[47] Europe (the poem's "we") is guilty of inflicting death, and now she stands to be judged, the murderess, herself engulfed by her own "reddened waters", the boomerang effect of what the Martinique poet in his *Discourse* develops into the notion of "Hitler", a synecdoche for colonialism, which Europe tolerated, vindicated and failed to see as barbaric for as long as it was directed against "the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the blacks of Africa" (1955: 9-15). The thirst "for the quiet, green morning land" in the world as Kosovel perceives it can no longer be quenched, or as Yeats would have it in his apocalyptic verse "the ceremony of innocence is drowned" (Yeats 1985: 210). Indeed, the only

[46] Tagore's poem was published in Slovenian translation (Karel Ozvald) in the journal *Socialna misel* (*Social Thought*) in 1922, as "Solnčni zahod stoletja", p. 41.

[47] Kosovel revises meanings of "culture", "civilization", "humanism" throughout his opus. A good example of his questioning the notion of "culture" in the manner of Césaire is found in the prose poem "*Pismo*" ("Letter"): "How can I believe in the meaning of culture and in its great powers? Cultured nations, they murder, subjugate, kill. Is that cultural ethics?" in Kosovel 1991: 74.

glimmer of hope held by the image of green nature – a reference to the poet's native region, which, itself a victim of colonialism, one would imagine, is exempt from the collective European guilt – resounds in an incredulous cry:

> Ay, into this landscape, even this green,
> dewy landscape, even into this
> you will shine, evening sun,
> with burning rays? Even into this?

But the collective ordeal by fire and water with their allusions to purgation and flood is total:

> The sea is flooding the green plains,
> the sea of stinging evening blood
> and there is no salvation, none
> until we both fall, you and I,
> until we fall, I and all of us,
> until we all die under the weight of blood
>
> the sun will shine on us
> European corpses,
> with golden rays.
>
> (in Kosovel 2008: 53-4)

Clearly, Europe, in some crucial sense, has failed or outlived itself and must die. To think of the young poet giving a debut reading of the poem on the evening of 23 February in 1926 to an audience of miners in the industrial town of Zagorje, is to gain a more precise sense of the main thrust of the poem's critique. Also, in the lecture Kosovel wrote for the occasion and tellingly titled "*Umetnost in proletarec*" ("Art and the Proletarian"), he expounds his views on the achievements but ultimate failure of capitalism, insisting that art should not be class-bound, that everyone is entitled to the products of industrial and scientific progress and deserves a dignified standard of living (CW 3: 26-8). He even explains his intended meaning for the death motif as signifying the end of the liberal-bourgeois capitalist system, acknowledging also his debt to Oswald Spengler's epochal book *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918 and 1920) – incidentally also a book that commanded huge respect among the Negritudinists, including Césaire and Senghor, offering, as one scholar noted, "the hope of a reversal of current European

dominance of the African world" (Arnold 1983: 112).[48] If capitalist Europe has proven incapable of establishing rights for all men and women, creating vast distances instead through relations of domination and subjugation, then Kosovel looked towards a new social order that promised to remedy the condition of human alienation. With hopes embodied in the Russian revolution, the days of capitalism, he was convinced, were numbered (CW 3: 48). But socialism for him was, in the final instance, "a new humanism", as it was for many writers and poets of liberation mentioned so far.

The spear of Tagore's critique of the West, as expressed in his poem "The Sunset of the Century", seems comparatively even more pointed. Originally written in Bengali on the last day of the nineteenth century, to be translated later into English by Tagore himself and included as an appendix to his essays on *Nationalism* (1917), presumably as a poetic corollary to the essays, the poem voices stark protest against power-mongering Western civilization. His lambasting of the West shares some of the frenzy seen in Kosovel's expressionistic shriek (for I visualise the poem as Munch's agonised figure hollering against the blood-red skyline in his painting *The Scream*, 1893):

> The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its own
> shameless feeding.
> For it has made the world its food,
> And licking it, crunching it, and swallowing it in big morsels,
> It swells and swells
> Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven
> piercing its heart of grossness.

The West for Tagore is identified with the abstract dehumanizing machine of "the Nation" that has come to feed on India in the form of imperialism. In the same way that Kosovel's poem anticipates an end to capitalist/imperialist Europe, Tagore too prophesies an end to this abnormal feast that must die "under its own excess". Both their dire visions therefore contain in themselves a promise of hope and renewal. For Kosovel this hope is embodied by the "green, dewy landscape" of his native Primorska, and Tagore too projects his hopes into his India. But the dichotomy thus

[48]As an aside, Césaire began to compose his long "surrealist" poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) which powerfully explores the concept of Negritude, during a trip he made to Yugoslavia and while visiting with his friend, the latter-day professor of French at the University of Zagreb, Petar Guberina, an island in the Adriatic Sea. Cf. Césaire chronology in Césaire 2001: 65.

emerging between an essentially aggressive (and masculine) West and an innocent, uncorrupted "Motherland" is sharper in Tagore's poem, as India, associated with the new dawn coming from the East, stands in direct opposition to the West:[49]

> Keep watch, India.
> Bring your offerings of worship for that sacred sunrise.
> Let the first hymn of its welcome sound in your voice and sing.
> [...]

As she awaits the new dawn, Tagore turns to her poverty and simplicity as a source of strength and endurance:

> Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud and the powerful
> With your white robe of simpleness.
> Let your crown be of humility, your freedom the freedom of the soul.
> Build God's throne daily upon the ample bareness of your poverty
> And know that what is huge is not great and pride is not everlasting.
>
> (Tagore 2001: 466)

Tagore's vision, in this particular poem, is framed unequivocally from the outside of the imperial West. This gives the speaker a certain distance in voicing his protest. Kosovel's speaker, on the other hand, has more of an ambivalent position. Both an outsider and insider, his call to Europe's destruction, for all its resoluteness, is not without a lamenting undertone. If Tagore's West is portrayed in scarcely human terms, more as a gluttonous monster, Kosovel's Europe is nevertheless imagined as a beautiful queen. While the two poets hold the same target for their critique, Kosovel, himself a European, is up against a moral dilemma Tagore does not have to face. It will do to recall in this respect another of Tagore's anti-imperialist poems. The following lines from his late poem "Africa" can be read in an interesting way if we imagine Kosovel to be the addressee:

> Come, poet of the end of the age,
> Stand in the dying light of advancing nightfall
> At the door of despoiled Africa
> And say, "Forgive, forgive – "

[49] It must be noted here that his poem was written against the background of British intervention in the Boer War, and Tagore was, in that period, "burning with indignation against abuses of European imperialism [...] aggressively defying Western racism, militarism, and economic exploitation" (Kopf 1988: 294).

In the midst of murderous insanity,
May these be your civilization's last, virtuous words.

(in Tagore 1994: 103)

This is a stark appeal to the conscience of any European poet, insofar as he or she is ready to assume European colonization of Africa as their own historical freight. A poet like Marinetti would perhaps be the more obvious addressee here, but "Ecstasy of Death", it seems to me, plumbs the question of European guilt in no comforting terms. As its subject progressively shifts from "them" ("the Western Europe" of the first stanza) to "us" ("we people" in the middle of the poem) and finally assumes an individual perspective in the "I" at the very end, demanding death without exception, the poem collapses the line between "good" and "evil", "us" and "them", bringing the divide, much more disturbingly, into the heart of every civilization and, by implication, individual. As Césaire would chillingly have it, it acknowledges that there is a Hitler inside every European. "The green dewy landscape" is a myth, and is therefore sacrificed in the catastrophic ordeal. At the end of an age, Kosovel does not exactly say "forgive", but he sets out to reconstruct the remains of a fallen civilization by addressing the failure of Christian, bourgeois humanism. He frames the task of "new humanism" as coming into touch with another human being, but "not", as he says at the end of his essay "Crisis", "beyond good and evil, justice and injustice, not with a superhuman lie: but as people [...] in the midst of the very good and evil, justice and injustice" (CW 3: 20).

The shift to the poetic "I" in this poem is crucial and should not be muted by general statements that detect in this sample of Kosovel's activist expressionist lyrics a conscious giving up of individualism for the perspective of the plural "we" of universal brotherhood, which have dominated the readings of "Ecstasy" (cf., for example, Kralj 1986: 183). Kosovel may be taking on the perspective of the future of all mankind, but his universalist goal is posited emphatically as a task for the individual. The New Age will not be brought about through violent revolution, but by an inner transformation of each and every person: "I am convinced that the only way Europe will be cured is if every individual remains in touch with his or her inner life" (letter to Karmela, 13/07/1923, CW 3: 497).

The "I" of Kosovel's "ecstatic" vision is the split subject of an age in crisis, in the sense of being subjected to its dominant imperialist logic and in having agency to challenge and resist it. Kosovel's "new man" embodies this overcoming of an

imperialist mindset, to – antithetically – think and feel beyond the dominant opposition current in a culture. The much older meaning of ecstasy as derived from Greek *ekstasis* – from *ek* "out" + *histanai* "to place/cause to stand" – implies precisely that. In "Ecstasy", Kosovel already *is* the "new man" of his poetic evocations, but not in any politically doctrinaire sense, but as a poet and artist (the association between the "new man" and "new artists" will be explored in the following chapter):

> Only the artist who has stepped out [sl. *izstopil,* ek-stasis] of the marshes of contemporary society and entered a new society, which he felt within himself, only such an artist is the new priest of truth, justice, humanity and goodness. The rest will die along with the old world (CW 3: 650).[50]

For all its seeming abstractness, the poem "Ecstasy of Death" is beautifully nested in various layers of references and meanings, drawing on the personal and the local in conjunction with the national and the global. One can imagine that the poem grew out of Kosovel's first-hand witnessing, as Stano had written of his brother, of "hordes of soldiers going off to battle never to return" (Kosovel 1971: 16); of seeing blood drip from a cart of wounded men, as related by his sister Antonija; of seeing poverty and misery from up close in the Karst villages during and after the war and experiencing it himself as an impoverished student in Ljubljana. His engaged encounters with the lives of workers and his friendships with leftist intellectuals, in particular Ivo Grahor and Vladimir Martelanc,[51] are also part of the personal background to the poem. Knowing also that there was a dearth of water in the Karst in Kosovel's lifetime, to the extent that, during the war years, water sources had to be put under military guard (*Ibid.*: 14), gives the lines "o, there is no more water left in Europe / and we people drink blood" an acuteness and urgency that works simultaneously on the concrete and metaphoric levels.

It can indeed be said of Kosovel that in the manner of best "regional" poets, he gave a particular landscape and geography an expression that made the Karst and its fate communicable across time and space. He universalized the historic

[50] The association between the "new man" and "new artists" will be explored in the following chapter.
[51] Ivo Grahor (1902-1944) was a writer and political activist who became Kosovel's "authentic informer" on post-revolution Russia, where he spent some time in 1924. Vladimir Martelanc (b. in Trieste, 1905-1944) joined the communist movement formed around the editorship of the newspaper *Delo* (in Trieste) in 1923, and supplied Kosovel with Marxist literature.

experience of Primorska in images of pine trees and landscape threatened by extinction:

> I saw the pines grow
> into the sky. Calm stoics
> through the flaring sun.
> I saw a fire once
> that would burn them up.
>
> (Appendix B: 266)[52]

And as he, at other times, turned to his native region for solace and source of renewal, away from the greys of Ljubljana, imbuing the landscape with brighter colours – the autumnal greens and golds of his favourite season – he would also embed in his lines a call to resistance. This is perhaps most paradigmatically, and subtly, expressed in one of his best-known poems "Pines" (Appendix B: 267).[53] A poem that resists translation into other languages because of its strong sound orchestration once again identifies the Karst landscape and its upright (resilient) people with its – ironically non-indigenous – pine trees.[54] The haunting repetition of *"bori"* can simply mean "pines" (which is how this line has always been understood), but if read as a verbal construction and not a noun phrase, "bori" resonates with the meaning "to fight!":[55]

> Pines, pines in silent horror,
> pines, pines in mute horror,
> pines, pines, pines!

Substitute "pines" for "fight", since "*bori*!" can evoke both – an equally expressive double meaning presents itself in English – and these "sentinels" and "mute witnesses" of the next stanza are summoned to fight and resist the horrors

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[52] Part of the regional scheme to ameliorate the Karst region in Kosovel's day was to introduce the black pine to the region (this would prevent rapid erosion from the Bora wind and prepare the ground for easier water collection and agriculture). Kosovel's father was in the forefront of these initiatives, hoping in fact that his youngest son would chose a practical vocation that would help the region overcome its problems with water and infertile land (Stano Kosovel 1970: 12-3). As a young boy, Kosovel planted seeds given to him by his father, so that quite literally he saw the pine trees grow.

[53] Published in 1925 in the periodical *Mladina* (227), republished in CW 1: 62.

[54] In Slovenian, precisely for its exceptional melodiousness conveyed through the repetion of the broad [ô] sound, the poem has been set to music a number of times (B. Ščck, A. Srebotnjak).

[55] Strictly speaking the verb "to fight" in Slovenian is reflexive ("*bori se*"), but the stem is nevertheless there. In a letter to Debevec, Kosovel actually uses the stem of the word to mean "fight", when he urges his colleagues that they "stopiti v 'bor' z vso slovensko javnostjo, ki je gnila do korenik" ["enter into "fight" with the entire Slovenian public sphere, which is rotten down to the roots"] (9/07/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 209).

perpetuated under Fascism in Primorska. Is "bori", in other words, a code word for struggle?

In Kosovel, as in many other poets of resistance, poetry and poetic language become in themselves a form of resistance. As Barbara Harlow writes on the subject of resistance literature:

> Poetic language is not envisaged here as a rarefied or transcendent means of expression, detached from the political reality of struggle, but rather it is considered an integral part of the ideological foundations of the new social order, personal as well as public, the language of decrees no less than of love letters. The new language, the language made from the combined forces of resistance and poetry [embodied in "*bori*"], is still to be forged (1987: 60).

The revolution Kosovel therefore defended and called for meant primarily an *aesthetic* revolution of poetic expression in direct response to the political and personal struggles of life. "Artistic form", he noted, "is but the artist's personal relationship with life" (CW 3: 657). And the courage to live out life's contradictions and give them shape in art was a mark of true existence.

On the other hand, modernity for Kosovel was a mandate for change and cultural growth, and thus an important intervention into the traditional and the local: "Our art has become local and not Slovenian in an absolute sense. Our art has become imitative and not modern in the global sense of the term. Our artists have not learnt from European artists, but they have imitated them blindly" (CW 3: 41). Kosovel indeed urged Slovenian artists to engage with "European" art, making a point to differentiate between learning and imitation, but, like Tagore, he also guarded against the danger of surrendering one's selfhood in a-priori acceptance of the cultural hegemony of the West. The Europe Kosovel is referring to in the citation is, of course, the Europe of the powerful centres, such as Germany, France, Britain and Italy, whose politico-economic superiority would often be extrapolated to assumptions of cultural one. With his inherited otherness as a Slav and writing from the margins of the "European/modern" fold, the poet can be seen to half-accept and half-reject this hierarchization of cultures:

> We have been modelling ourselves too much on Europe and too little on ourselves. We did not see ourselves as members of Europe who

> must go abreast with European movements and yet go their own way; we saw ourselves only as a small people, who must surrender to European ideas, lest we should be destroyed by them (Ibid.: 40).

Time and again Kosovel wrote of the need to pursue the freedom of individual cultural expression, and yield neither to slavish conformism nor patriotic self-centredness, or "egocentric self-love", as he put it (CW 3: 60). The "patriot" in Kosovel's books is as short sighted as the "underling", and the two representatives of what he perceived as the dominant tendencies existing within the Slovenian culture came under constant attack in his writing (CW 3: 14; 41; 61; 700; 701). The Slovenian people needed to progress beyond the stage of merely defending a people and instead rise up to the pressing task of liberating them (CW 3: 60). Moreover, as he wrote in a letter to his colleague Vinko Košak: "When our relationship towards ourselves, the world and people is deep, lucid and great, then our art will be great too" (2/08/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 226). And this, he stressed, requires asserting an independent and critical relationship with Europe, lodged in a high ethical ideal: "Our ideal is European man, separate in his many faces, but one in his tremendous striving: to love all people and work in that love" (CW 3: 59). Like Tagore, Kosovel too argued for a non-hierarchical dialogue between cultures.

Kosovel's commitment to resistance was not only reflected in his numerous stylistic metamorphoses as a poet, in which he successfully combined new means of expression with traditional themes and local concerns (the subject of the next chapter), but also in the way he reflected upon this commitment, seeing in it, as it were, a historical imperative. At the root of his cultural eclecticism, I want to suggest, was his critique of nationalism. It is here that his thinking is most directly indebted to Tagore, as evinced by an essay he wrote in 1923 and entitled "Nationhood and Education",[56] drawing largely on two works while addressing Slovenian concerns: Romain Rolland's biography of Tolstoy and Tagore's book *Nationalism* (1917).

Based on Tagore's definition of the Nation (capitalised) as "the aspect of a whole people as an organized power", Kosovel sets this negative "materialist" notion against what is a positive spiritual category of *narodnost* (nationhood): "a sum total

[56] "*Narodnost in vzgoja*" was published in *Učiteljski list* ("The Pedagogical Gazette"), a journal of the Association of Slavic pedagogical societies in Trieste, which gathered around it a group of socially committed Slovenian writers and publicists, with whom Kosovel collaborated. An article on Tagore's book *Nationalismus* had already appeared in 1922 in the gazette, no. 29, year III (Pirjevec 1995).

of all the elements of a people's spirituality" (Kosovel CW 3: 66). *Narodnost* seems to correspond most closely with Tagore's definition of "society" as "the expression of those moral and spiritual aspirations of man which belong to his higher nature" (Tagore 2001: 421). Kosovel cites Tagore where the abstraction of Nation comes under attack on the grounds that it dissolves "personal humanity" and that "when [society] allows itself to be turned into a perfect organization of power [...] there are few crimes it is unable to perpetrate". Interestingly, Kosovel then applies Tagore's distinction between the nation-state and a people (society) to distinguish between what he calls "ethical socialism" and "materialist socialism". While the former remains bound to the high ethical ideal of "*equality of all the people* and *nations*", the latter has surrendered the human ideals to the principles of power and organization. He sees the ideology of socialism as having fully sailed "the materialist waters" by failing to distinguish between the nation state and nationhood and sacrificing the individual and his spiritual needs to a soulless organization. "Materialist socialism", in other words, comes under as fierce an attack as do nationalism and militarism, catering as they do, in Tagore's language – "the man of a limited purpose" (Kosovel CW 3: 63-5).

Following Tagore's argument against nationalism closely, citing substantial sections from the book, particularly the sections dealing explicitly with the critique of Western imperialist powers, Kosovel is fully in consonance with Tagore on the idea of having to find a basis of unity, which is not political (*Ibid.*: 66-7). His notion of "nationhood" as a spiritual principle, while it can bind a particular people in unity, rests on the assumption that cannot be delimited by geopolitical boundaries:

> 'Nationhood' is a part of the human soul, and it is the basis from which culture emerges. But culture does not encompass the soul life of only one people; it extends towards infinity [...] it is the outcome of man's striving to attain as closely as he can that spiritual beauty, goodness, that perfection which he intuits and knows exists. That goal is something which defines human culture in general" (68).

Because this goal is generic of human culture as such, all peoples and individuals are "on their way towards perfection". Impossible as it may be to define what perfection is – it can only be intuited – our contemplating it, in whatever shape or form, will safeguard us against egoism. "Perhaps the whole point of eternity", Kosovel suggests, "is in that it is there for us to tend toward" (*Ibid.*).

Driving a wedge between nationhood and nationalism meant for Kosovel demarcating the important sense of national selfhood from a self-indulgent celebration of one's own identity. The two, he also realized, can easily converge. Nationhood thus requires a measure of selflessness, lest it should lead down "the wide road of national egoism" (67). Therefore, it remains vital to cultivate the perspective of "the soul". The acknowledgement of spiritual or soul reality, upon which Kosovel's conceptions of culture and nationhood rest, is for him a pre-requisite, a kind of a regulative mechanism for both individuals and collectives. "Altruism stems from a higher recognition that our physical existence needs to be in harmony with our spiritual one" (*Ibid.*). This, for Kosovel, could simply mean to think with your heart, for the soul, like the heart, is the centre of emotions, and thus a much-needed antidote to what he elsewhere dubbed "the heartless, hyper-intellectual civilization" of the West (CW 3: 27).

Adopting such a spiritual view of nationhood and rebutting nationalism which, he claims, uses nationhood to rally support for its essentially aggressive and expansionist goals, Kosovel finally addresses the important question of cultural and civilizational difference. Following on from his definition of nationhood as the foundation from which culture emerges, but since culture can never be exhausted by the soul-life of one people, Kosovel must conclude that "civilization is inherently international". While different nationhoods are akin to different faces, at bottom, they are, he contends, "essentially the same, even if it is often hardly possible to say that they are similar" (*Ibid.*: 68). This is Kosovel's rephrasing of Tagore's concept of unity in diversity. Differences, as Kosovel and Tagore both understood, also never operate simply between various individuals and cultures, but are constitutive of one and the same individual (as also culture). For Kosovel, a human being is inherently "cosmopolitan" (Journal, CW 3: 627), and Tagore's creed of "the larger 'We'" has already been discussed.[57]

At the same time, it must be understood that Kosovel was no advocate of passionless participation or abstract individualism. He saw identities as being vitally shaped by whatever relationships and attachments entered into them: local, international, global. Internationalism for him did not mean riding roughshod over the local and the particular, but rather, the local and the particular is the only place where branching outwards can – and must – begin. "Man", Kosovel stressed, "is embedded in his surroundings, in relationship with his people, landscape, and

[57] Cf. pp. 71-2 above.

animals." (CW 3: 57) Art, too, must be anchored in concrete experience and express its relationship to the environment; it must, he said, "reflect our life struggles and our aspirations [and] grow out of our own self-perfection" (CW 3: 20).

In this chapter we considered some of the historical pressures that shaped Kosovel's life, taking a world-historical perspective so as to identify the common ground that united the two poets across different continents, and saw that like Tagore, Kosovel rejected nationalism and propagated a kind of rooted universal humanism, insisting time and again that "*narod* must see itself in the mirror of humankind" (Journal, CW 3: 683). Because of real and imagined imperialist threats to Slovenian existence, he was up against a climate in which traditionalism and domesticity were the prescribed modes, and guarding and affirming cultural separateness was seen as essential (Poniž 2004). In contrast, Kosovel's quest for "Slovenianness", at times feverish, especially towards the end of a prematurely cut-off life, refused to succumb to narratives of cultural identity that harp on ideas of origin, race or some other allegedly natural essence. Instead he projected a new type of human being – "new man" – who would resist assimilation into coercive identity politics and institute a future world of harmony and solidarity. No doubt utopian in their thrust, his ideas nevertheless posed a challenge to fixed mono-cultural roots prevalent in the nationalist thinking of his day. For certainly, by the standards of the more jingoist quarters, where preserving "authentic" national values was the priority, and conducted mainly as a "struggle against the corrupting influence of the West" (Djurić 2003: 80), such a launching of aspirations for cosmopolitan Slovenianness was seen as suspect at best, and treacherous at worst. Indeed, in those uncertain times, cosmopolitanism "automatically meant apostasy or at least deviation from 'true' Slovenianness" (Poniž 2004: 322).

Similarly, with respect to formal and linguistic innovations, traditionalism held the upper hand, owing to the fact that smaller Slavic cultures have historically forged a very close link between language, literature and politics, so that literature is often seen as the sacred shrine of national values, and language "*a national value*" itself (Bošnjak n.d.: 157-8 in Djurić 2003: 80). Some Slavic theorists of the avant-garde have even dubbed them "philological nations [...] constituted through their national language". Given the sacred role literature and literary language are thereby entrusted with, any violation of traditionally sanctioned forms is seen as a direct attack on the national body itself (*Ibid.*: 66).

Literary historians are also wont to point out that Slovenian literature, since its secular beginnings in the second half of the eighteenth century, has always been characterised by an inner tension regarding home and the world. This tension between ethnocentric and cosmopolitan directions resolved itself differently at different times, from shutting out foreign influences to coexisting alongside them, but the most creative moments were always those when the various influences intermingled, giving rise to works which displayed "an organic synthesis between the national and the universal" (Pirjevec 1997: 7). Kosovel, as the next chapter will explore, pushed precisely at the national boundaries of literary language as he produced new forms and meanings from the in-between space of various cultural influences.

6. AVANT-GARDIST WITH A DIFFERENCE

> An age without constant models is a progressive, dynamic age; it moves in the name of a spirited, unacknowledged creative ideal.
>
> Kosovel, 1925, journal

Kosovel responded to the challenge of a rapidly globalizing world by simultaneously turning to his own culture and endorsing what came to him from other parts of the world. In spite of the historical pressures his fellow Slovenians were under to protect and preserve their "national" identity, he did not go by the narrow focus of cultural "authenticity", adopting instead an increasingly active stance to promulgate cross-cultural interactions and foster internationalisation in art. This led him to negotiate the concept of "Slovenianness" not only within the wider European framework but also, as I have argued, in alignment with global forces that had brought the overwhelming part of the non-Western world under colonial domination.

Starting out as a poet in a more or less traditional vein, rooted in the literary culture of his origin, Kosovel seized the international "moment" towards radical reform of poetic expression and became Slovenia's foremost modernist and avant-garde voice of the inter-bellum years. The shift in his style has been understood entirely as the outcome of the poet's engagement with the European literary avant-gardes (German, Italian, Russian, French and Yugoslav). This chapter, however, explores the impact Tagore had on Kosovel's thinking and poetics with respect to his writing in general and to his personal avant-gardism in particular, arguing in the process for a less regimented approach to the so-called "peripheral" modernisms and/or avant-gardisms.

The common Western perceptions of the Indian poet as a "mystic" and "romantic" have set up a framework within which the avant-gardes and the Indian "seer" are seen as mutually exclusive, but Kosovel's intellectual engagement with Tagore tells a different story. Its significance is inscribed in the very title Kosovel chose for the book of poems he wanted to publish in the last year of his life. He

called it *Zlati čoln* (*The Golden Boat*), in direct allusion to Tagore's *Sonar tari*. Moreover, in the preface to the collection, the only surviving part of the manuscript, Kosovel announced his intentions as a poet to move away from the "velvety lyrics", the badge of a "sentimental youth", and endorse a style better suited to the harsh realities of the rapidly-changing modern world (CW 1: 413). His reading of the Indian poet and his modernist "shift" are, I argue, intimately linked. Before I go on to explore this link, however, a brief analysis of Kosovel's publishing history, and some related issues, is in order.

From *Zlati čoln* to *Integrali*

In his short life Kosovel managed to publish no more than a few dozen poems, a small number of articles and a few short prose pieces. Soon after his death, he was marked out as one of the most important voices of his generation, and his work began to be presented also in independent publications. Kosovel's output, both voluminous and diverse, was "processed" and "packaged" in stages; it took over half a century for the various sides of his artistic personality to be fully revealed.[1] The first book of his poems, bearing the title *Pesmi* (*Poems*), was brought out by his immediate circle of friends already in 1927, a year after his death. It consisted of sixty of what today pass as his "traditional" lyrics. Four years later this collection was supplemented by *Izbrane pesmi* (*Selected poems*, 1931),[2] a slightly larger but no more "adventurous" sampling of his poetry, this time edited by Anton Ocvirk, Kosovel's younger contemporary and founder of comparative literature in Slovenia in the 1930s.[3] At this point Ocvirk had already become the chief holder and editor of the poet's literary estate, taking it upon himself to present Kosovel to scholars and lay readers alike.

Between 1946 and 1977 Ocvirk edited four large volumes in the prestigious *Collected Works of Slovenian Poets and Writers* (*Zbrana dela slovenskih pesnikov in pisateljev*), bringing together over a thousand pages of poetry and several hundred of

[1] Although by 1977, in the final book of his collected works, most of Kosovel's oeuvre (including his letters, journals and notes) was made available, the process of uncovering and presenting Kosovel's legacy to the public remains a continuing one; a substantial body of correspondence was published for the first time (cf. Kosovel 2007), and some further prose (cf. Kosovel 2008a).

[2] Cf. bibliography for full entries. Both publications, however, are unreliable, since they uncritically reproduced the poems that previously appeared in journals in bowdlerized form.

[3] For more on Ocvirk's seminal study *Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine* (*Theory of comparative literary history*, 1936, cf. Juvan 2008: 31, and for Ocvirk's role as a mediator of Indian literatures after establishing the Department of Comparative Literature as an independent unit at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, then called the Department of World Literature, cf.Pacheiner-Klander 2008.

prose, consisting of vignettes, polemical essays, literary criticism, journals, notes and a large body of letters – all of which he richly annotated. This was a commendable job by any standard, but compromized by the kind of monopolization that is the outcome when, in the absence of the author, one person becomes, as Ocvirk did for several decades, the sole arbiter in organizing, disseminating and, to a large extent, also interpreting a poet's legacy.[4]

Variously referred to as "co-author of Kosovel" (Dović 2005: 207) or as his "literary executor" (Juvan 2005: 192), Anton Ocvirk, it must be said, faced neither an easy nor a straightforward task. The majority of Kosovel's poems, left in at times barely legible manuscript form – writings fragmented and hastily thrown on loose scraps of paper, invoices, napkins and the like – were by and large undated. In the disordered heap of paper that he took over, there was in fact nothing by way of guidelines that would prescribe the manner in which Kosovel's work ought to be organized. The compilation of it became of necessity an act of construction on the part of the editor (cf. Dović 2005: 209-10).

The collection *Zlati čoln*, which Kosovel had ready for publication in October 1925, but which he did not succeed in getting published, is a case in point. When eventually, in 1954, a book *Zlati čoln* did appear, clearly to honour the poet's intended publication, the composition of it – the selection, number and order of the poems – was Ocvirk's. The manuscript itself had been lost and no definitive list of contents found or satisfactorily reconstructed. The only surviving "item" of the original manuscript was the preface, but this too was only remarked upon in the editorial introduction, rather than fully reproduced, since the publication was not – and could not be, as Ocvirk alleges – Kosovel's original book. In just under ninety poems, twice as many as Kosovel had intended,[5] *Zlati čoln*, however, supposedly compiled "the most representative creations from the *entirety* of Kosovel's literary

[4] The fact that Kosovel's papers were transferred to the archival holdings of the National University Library (NUK) in Ljubljana in 1962, but were not accessible to researchers apart from Anton Ocvirk, prompted Kosovel's close friend and associate Alfonz Gspan, the editor of the first book of his poems, to bring out what he personally possessed with respect to the poet – mainly some letters and notes. His book (cf. Gspan 1974), apart from filling one of the many gaps still existing in presenting Kosovel's opus to the public, marks also the beginning of a fierce polemic surrounding Kosovel's long-drawn out canonization that has affected much of subsequent Slovenian scholarship. Now that Kosovel's papers are openly available to researchers and the process of editing is understood as a sequence of arbitrary choices, it is possible to move beyond this polemic, which is essentially extraneous to Kosovel's writing, and engage afresh with the texts themselves, most of which are now available to (cautious) readers in unadulterated form. The facsimile publication of a corpus of his writings published in 2004 with transcriptions underneath (where the writing is undecipherable, different possibilities are stated, or even gaps are left) is a clear invitation to the reader to establish a direct relationship with the texts, unmediated through editorial intervention. Cf. Kosovel 2004a.

[5] Cf. letter to Fanica Obidova, 1/09/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 241.

heritage" (emphasis mine, Ocvirk 1973: 119). Soon it turned out this was not the case. Indeed, what is today generally considered to be the most exciting part of the poet's opus, his avant-garde writings (now perhaps somewhat one-sidedly as regards his other and earlier poetry), was not part of the collection (neither would it have been in Kosovel's intended publication). When the editor realized – prompted no doubt by the new wave of the avant-gardes and the emergence of concrete and visual poetry in the 1960s (Djurić 2003: 79-80) – that what he had previously thought of as "by and large rough and unfinished notes" and "mere experimentation" were in fact fully-fledged poems, he amended for his error of judgement by bringing out an independent collection of Kosovel's as yet unseen modernist texts – some 155 poems – giving it the title *Integrali '26* (*Integrals '26*) (Ocvirk 1974: 563). [6] The book, when it was released in 1967, made for one of the most "outrageous" events in Slovenian literary publishing history, sending shock-waves of surprise and indignation across the literary establishment: where had these poems been until now?

Kosovel, the poet of predominantly traditional lyrics, by then already considered a Slovenian national classic, became a radical modernist overnight. At once he was claimed by the modernist poets of the 1960s as their direct forerunner, a long-suppressed "contemporary", and the establishment found in him a missing piece in Slovenian literary history, according him in retrospect the central place in the so called "historical avant-garde" (Kos 1986).[7] Translated into numerous European languages since, *Integrali '26* has acquired somewhat of an iconic status, and not unlike Tagore's English *Gitanjali* (1912), albeit on incomparably smaller scale, brought Kosovel international exposure.[8] Significantly, it was in French rather than in the Slovene original that sixteen of these poems first saw the light of day.[9]

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[6] To be precise, a dozen poems from *Integrali* were in fact published already in the First Volume of Collected Works in 1946, mostly between pp. 238-243, but, collectively perceived as part of Kosovel's last "constructivist" phase, were then excluded from the revised edition of 1964 to be made part of this new collection, which is where Ocvirk felt they ultimately belonged.

[7] The theoretization of Yugoslav avant-gardes is a relatively recent phenomenon in literary studies. The contention of the British scholar and translator John Willet (1917-2002), put forth in his study *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (1978), that there were no avant-gardes south of the line running from Vienna to Budapest – the West-East divide again holding sway over scholarly imagination – was conclusively invalidated in the mid-1980s (cf. Vrečko 2005: 177), as serious research was undertaken to theorize the avant-gardes of the 1920s, collectively labelled as the historical avant-garde. Cf. Flaker 1982; Vrečko 1986; Djurić, Dubravka and Miško Šuvaković eds. 2003.

[8] Cf. bibliography for translations.

[9] The French poet Marc Alyn came to Slovenia in the 1960s with the intention of putting together a selected poems of Kosovel for the Parisian publisher Pierre Seghers and their eminent *Poètes d'aujourd'hui* series. With the assistance of most notably Viktor Jesenik, who provided French literals, including of some poems from the *Integrali* manuscript that was awaiting publication, Alyn completed the translation project, complementing it also with a substantial introduction (Alyn 1965).

This elaborately designed collection was no "innocent belated publication" but once again, for better or for worse, a construct (Dović 2005: 210). Again Ocvirk took the title from Kosovel to name what is essentially his own editorial selection from the poet's more radical writings, arguing that this corpus of poems marked the last stage of Kosovel's creative evolution, his so-called "constructivist" poetry – hence the "'26" appended to the title (Ocvirk 1974: 560-69).[10] Discounting some of the errors that arose from inaccurately transcribing the manuscript versions, there is also the question of the suitability of the book's design. Kosovel's experimental lyrics which incorporated pictorial and typographical elements were "translated" from handwritten manuscripts onto a typed page in a way that was more attuned to the avant-gardes of the 1960s than those of the 1920s, thus linking Kosovel to a different time framework (though its attempt to foreground the very important visual aspect of his poetry deserves credit). But what presented the most controversial aspect of this book and has fuelled much scholarly debate since is the title, particularly since scholars have tried, against all odds, to pin down a corpus of poems to fit it.

Without getting caught up in the details of this debate, some discussion is nevertheless necessary. Janez Vrečko, for example, has delimited "integrals" from Kosovel's "kons" poems (the word *kons* being an abbreviation for what translates into English as "construction", "constructive" and "constructor", and which appears in the title of some twenty poems), linking the former with Kosovel's "social-revolutionary" lyrics and arguing that they were written in the aftermath of his so-called "constructivist" phase, a genealogy that is in itself questionable (Vrečko 1985). Bożena Tokarz has put forth a different understanding of "integrals", speculating originally on the notion behind the term, while acknowledging that "the integrals are merely an expression of an artistic idea, which Kosovel did not manage to realize" and that it is impossible to ascertain what poems Kosovel had in mind with this term (2005: 167). Alfonz Gspan's older analysis, however, seems to me the most useful, as it stems from a close reading of Kosovel's usage of the word itself in his two journal entries and a letter, and can help us avoid some unnecessary confusion.

For details, cf.Ocvirk 1974: 565-6. His French *Srečko Kosovel* (1965), which predated *Integrali* by two years, put Kosovel on the map of the twentieth-century European poetry.

[10] For a critical analysis of the publication cf. Gspan 1974: 99-111.

Briefly: In the summer of 1925, as it appears from his journal entries, Kosovel was toying with the idea of setting up his own publishing house called "Strelci" (Archers), the name taken from one of Oton Župančič's poems, which in turn would publish a series of books called *Integrali* (*Integrals*), each of which would be accompanied by a foreword or an introduction (Kosovel, Journal, CW 3: 698). Devoted to publishing individual works of the club members who wrote in different literary genres but were united in their openness to new ideas, the book series, Gspan logically concludes, would in itself enact a meaning of *Integrali* – "a bringing together of different parts into a larger whole" (1974: 101). It is indeed very likely that Kosovel would have included his own poetry collection, *The Golden Boat*, as part of the series, were he not depending on the honorarium he was promised by his publisher. Two pages later in the journal, Kosovel mentions *Integrali* as a title of a book, alongside some other book titles (CW 3: 699), possibly shifting from the more ambitious goal of a book-series and settling for a more realizable one (Gspan 1974: 100). And, finally two months later, in a letter to Fanica Obidova (incidentally the same letter in which he mentions publishing *Zlati čoln*) he speaks of having embarked on "an extreme path in poetry", and that his latest "cycle of poems" – "Integrals" – has an "entirely its own, idiosyncratic character." (1/09/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 241). It is this particular formulation that has, understandably, sent scholars in search of *integrals* and made Ocvirk adopt the word as a book-title, but while *kons* poems can be identified in what has survived of Kosovel's poetry, since they are titled so, *integrals* simply cannot. It is indeed the case that Kosovel's existing corpus offers many examples of such "extreme", avant-garde poetry, but only one poem so titled (Appendix B: 268). We cannot be sure that he had ever finished his "cycle", or even if he had, whether the cycle survived. Therefore to avoid confusion in terminology which has dogged writing about Kosovel's avant-garde poetry for so long (as scholars and lay readers persistently refer to Kosovel's "kons" *and* "integrals" as though it was clear what the latter consisted of), I will use the word *Integrals* only if referring to the actual poem, or in reference to Ocvirk's 1967 publication, which has, for all its problems, assumed a vital life of its own.

If such a debate seems somewhat extraneous to the existing body of texts that we can engage with as readers, regardless of whether they were meant as *integrals* or not, what is of course pertinent to consider, and bear in mind, is the suggestiveness of the word *integral* itself, which clearly was very important to Kosovel, as he held

on to the concept, while progressively scaling down his ambitions to a realizable goal. Both its verbal meaning of "integrate" (to bring together or incorporate parts into a whole) from the Latin *integrare* which originally meant to renew and restore, or, even, in its mathematical sense to perform the operation of integration, is worth bearing in mind for when we come to discuss in more detail Kosovel's poetry.

If the history of Kosovel's reception and canonisation, as Dović rightly points out, "must be read as a history of editorial appropriations and adaptations" (2005: 210), a further complication underlying it rests also in the positivist literary historical foundations that pursue a linear trajectory according to which an author evolves through a set of artistic stages. Without a fixed chronology to go by, Ocvirk, in organising Kosovel's heritage resorted to the principle of stylistic and thematic clustering.[11] Organizing the texts into four distinct but interdependent "stylistically and thematically rounded-off units", as he calls them, with "impressionist poems" in the first, "sonnets" in the second, "social-revolutionary poems" in the third, and "intimate-confessional lyrics" in the last, with each section further subdivided into a progression of motifs from the Karst poems to poems dealing with death, the editor expressly aimed to "create an internally cohesive whole" (Ocvirk 1964: 414-5).

It is this forging of the impression of inner unity in Kosovel's body of work, tied to a linear progression of styles from impressionism, via expressionism to constructivism, that has shaped the way "Kosovel" has been constructed and overdetermined by neat, but ultimately reductive, categories. In turn he has been projected as it befitted the ideologico-historical occasion: a melancholy bard of the Karst turned expressionist visionary, turned avant-gardist, turned socialist revolutionary and, last of all, an engaged social realist. Even as it became clear that the poet wrote in a diversity of styles at one and the same time and scholars acknowledged the simultaneity of his different poetics, recognizing that his growth was not linear or progressive in any predetermined way (Gspan 1974: 105-8), there was still remarkable persistence in Kosovel's scholarship to establish some kind of a linear logic to his evolution, neatly partitioning it into separate stages, recording clean-cut transitions between them (Vrečko 1986; Zadravec 1986).[12]

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[11] Some poems can be dated through their alignment with correspondence, journal entries and notes, where often the same phrases or words appear. This method has proved consequential for establishing that Kosovel did in fact write in a variety of styles simultaneously.

[12] Cf. also a paradigmatic statement: "The poetic opus, which Kosovel had, due to his untimely death, completed [sic!] at the age of 22, encompasses impressionist lyrics, followed by, after experiencing 'a turnabout within him', a resolve for constructivism, which, in line with numerous European avant-gardists, peters out into revolutionary lyrics." Thus laying out the stages of Kosovel's "evolution", the

Regarding a poet who died so young, whose writing career spanned no more than five to six years, who had no chance to organize his writing or exercise any influence over the construction of his poetic self, and who left so many plans unrealized, this "holistic" search for a totalising narrative of artistic evolution seems, frankly speaking, absurd. Although perhaps at odds with the project of "cultural nationalism" that has underpinned much of literary historiography in Slovenia, a country that achieved its full-fledged political independence only in 1991 and in which literature, particularly poetry, has been the historical mainstay of its national identity,[13] it would be more useful to approach Kosovel's existing opus as "unrealized potential", for all that there is, in his legacy, that is clearly realized and ahead of its time.

Poetic synergy

In the short space that was available to Kosovel, Musil's line from his epochal novel *The Man without Qualities* – "Time was making a fresh start just then (it does so all the time), and a new time needs a new style" (1995: 15) – captures the very logic of the young poet's search for a form that would reflect and engage with the reality of the fast-changing modern world. This search reveals a tremendous readiness not just to respond to experience but to seek out experience and avail himself of, actively and thoughtfully, almost every literary model that came his way. In the 1920s, keeping his finger on the pulse of the present, the poet was engaging with a great many of the major "isms" of the day: from post-impressionism and symbolism to German expressionism, Italian futurism, Russian constructivism, and French dadaism and surrealism, much of which was meditated to him through the eclectic, new Balkan

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author, contradicting the previous statement, continues: "And yet, it is interesting to note that Kosovel was working with all three "trends" simultaneously, that in the time of his avant-gardeism and political activity [*sic*], he did not give up his impressionist – 'velvety' lyrics" (Vrečko 2002: 13). As for Kosovel's "political activity", beyond editorial work, engaged readings and founding of a literary club, I have not been able to establish anywhere that Kosovel became "politically active" in the sense of joining a political party, as is implied here and stated elsewhere, and has passed into common knowledge (cf. Jovanovski 2005: 96). In fact, Dragica Sosič (b. 1936), whose uncle was married to one of Kosovel's sisters, explicitly said this was not the case, as I put the question to her when I visited Kosovel's home in Tomaj in September 2007.

[13] For a critical stance on the shortcomings of Slovene comparative literature, which has, despite its cosmopolitan efforts, continued to pursue the model of cultural nationalism, perceiving "national literature" as the basic conceptual unit that delimits the space of cross-cultural comparisons, cf. Juvan 2008: 25-38. One of the demands of cultural nationalism in relation to Kosovel is also the need to "prove" that he was "on-a-par" with "European" trends and movements.

Zenitist movement.[14] Hence it is not surprising that many of his poems resonate with a range of poetic voices, relaying their allegiance to "the foreign" and "indigenous" in a dialectical interplay that frankly incapacitates any clear-cut divide between the two. Indeed, once cultures and traditions are recognized more as inherently plural, internally heterogeneous and in a perpetual state of flux, the dichotomy between foreign and indigenous becomes rather artificial.

Another look at Kosovel's "Ecstasy of Death" evinces correspondences with a host of literary contemporaries across a wide stylistic spectrum. From German Expressionist tradition, to which this poem has been assigned a prevailing indebtedness, Jakob van Hoddis, Ernst Toller, and especially Georg Trakl and Franz Werfel have been singled out by scholars as formative influences (Zadravec 1966a: 102-10).[15] The impact of Futurism has perhaps in this particular case not received as much attention as it deserves because of the general tendency to see this segment of Kosovel's writing as exclusively expressionist, a point noted by Zbigniew Folejewski in his comparative study and anthology of global Futurist trends (1980: 106).[16] Since both trends were reported in Slovene periodicals and their theories and manifestos hotly debated within the literary circles, there is no reason to presume they would not have been both absorbed and incorporated, with considerable overlap, into artistic expression as well.[17] The role of Yugoslav Zenitism with specific contributions from Ljubomir Micić, Ivan Goll and others has also been related to Kosovel's poem (Ocvirk 1977: 982; Kralj 1986: 133), not to mention the fact that by the time Kosovel

[14] This movement formed around the review *Zenit* (Zenith), a leading journal for the dissemination of new art and culture in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. With a strong international orientation, publishing articles in the original languages (French, German, Russian, Flemish, Hungarian, Italian, Esperanto even), it became a lively platform for introducing and debating the most contemporary trends in the art world. It was also amongst the foremost European avant-garde journals of the 1920s, alongside *Der Sturm*, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *7 Arts*, *De Stijl*, *Vesc/Gegenstand/Object* etc. First launched in 1921 in Zagreb (Croatia) by the controversial figure of Ljubomir Micić, then transferred to Belgrade in 1923, the journal produced 43 issues before it was banned by the authorities in 1926 on the grounds of alleged Bolshevik propaganda. (The digital version of the review is available online through Narodna Biblioteka Srbska at http://www.digital.nbs.bg.ac.yu/novine/zenit/swf.php?lang=scr).

[15] Van Hoddis's poem "The End of the World", 1911, is the opening poem of Kurt Pinthus's eminent anthology of Expressionist poetry *Menschheitsdämerung* (in English the title is rendered either as *Twilight of Humanity* or *Dawn of Humanity*), 1919, which Kosovel is known to have read in German. Many Slovene poets and writers studied in Graz, Prague, Vienna, or Münich, among them Kosovel's sister Karmela, his artist-friend Avgust Černigoj and literary colleague Ciril Debevec. Kosovel drew on all these connections to inquire about the latest developments in art and have books sent to him. He would also have been familiar with the then leading Expressionist journals *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*.

[16] This unique study devotes an entire section to Slovenian Futurist poetry, alongside Polish, Czech, Portuguese and Brazilian Futuristic trends, as well as those of Italy, Russia and Ukraine.Together with a brief introduction and commentary, it samples poems of Anton Podbevšek, Vladmir Premru and Srečko Kosovel in both the original and English translation.

[17] For more on Futurism in relation to Kosovel's poetry, cf. Troha 1998; 1990: 107-9.

came to write "Ecstasy", Slovenian writers such as Anton Vodnik, Miran Jarc and most radically Anton Podbevšek had already lent their individual voices to apocalyptic pronouncements on bourgeois mores and western civilization, no doubt in affinity with some of the same sources.[18] As to Kosovel's social(ist) sensibility, one cannot go past the indigenous influence of Ivan Cankar, the foremost symbolist/modernist writer of the older generation (see Legiša 1969: 222-35). And, last but not least, there is the towering "presence" of Tagore, inscribed directly into the poem, as I have shown in the previous chapter. The stylistic composition of "Ecstasy of Death" is likewise inherently dialogic and polyphonic, bringing together traditionalist idiom with expressionist tropes, hyperbolic and grotesque in turn, as well as distinct futurist echoes.

When we thus say that Kosovel's poetry demonstrates a command of a multiplicity of styles, we do not only mean that there are poems which are determinedly "traditional" and "romantic" in form and sensibility (if by that we understand an adherence to a classical form, rhyme scheme and a particular mode of lyricism) at one end of the spectrum and those that are decidedly avant-garde at the other, but that very often a mixture of poetic styles is inscribed in one and the same text. Once Kosovel, energized by a host of idioms, set out to reinvent literary language – his poetic intentions were reflected on not only in his meta-poetic writings, such as his preface to *Zlati čoln*, but also in a number of poems about poetry – he came to combine traditionalist expression with modernist styles, the "classical" with the "avant-garde", in ways uniquely his own. Of course this meant going deeper than simply adopting a few formal innovations. Artistic originality in Kosovel's case combined a wide range of contemporary styles – exercising substantial freedom in cross-linking them from his own distinct experiential angle (social, cultural, psychological) – in reconciliation with traditional antecedents.

It is instructive to refer here, once again, to Marko Juvan's contribution to Kosovel scholarship, particularly with respect to the poet's hybrid modernism. Juvan neatly jettisons the established attempts to unpack Kosovel along the lines of separate, internally homogenous, literary trends and artistic stages by pointing to the inherent hybrid and international nature of modernism itself (2005: 196). Moreover, referring to the work of Steven Tötösy, he rightly argues that searching for "Kosovel's primordial and decisive avant-garde ideal" is a misguided endeavour,

[18] For samples of their work, see the anthology of Slovene futurist and expressionist lyrics, Zadravec 1966.

given the specific features of the Central European "literary zone of 'in-between peripherality'" where the avant-gardes were in themselves creating "unusual mixtures". Thus, rather than forcing Kosovel's individual texts into a "constructivist", "zenitist", "futurist", "surrealist" etc. mould, he opts for calling them simply "avant-garde texts", a strategy I agree with and intend to follow (193).

The fact that Kosovel would adopt free verse and keep writing sonnets, or abandon normative poetic conventions in his radical avant-garde "kons" poems but, at the same time, write "I love them, the simple words / of our Karst people" (Appendix B: 269), or, as Gspan tells us, compose an "impressionist" poem on one side of a sheet of paper and a poem in "the constructivist" technique on the other (1974: 107) – in short, his simultaneous usage of a plurality of poetic discourses, often, as it turns out, in one and the same text – need not surprise us in someone who, along with many other modernists, "persisted in th[e] inter-space, *in between* various literary discourses of the 1920s [...]" (emphasis author's, Juvan 2005: 196). Pablo Picasso's ability to carry out highly divergent projects simultaneously and go back and forth effortlessly between idioms, his cubist and classic representation switching hands or coalescing in one and the same work of art, is one obvious example that Juvan alludes to in this respect, while, in poetry, he recalls Fernando Pessoa as the most dramatic example of multiple poetic identities.

It is worth noting here that Kosovel was familiar with Picasso's work, though in what capacity it is difficult to establish. The fact that his poem sequence called "Prisoners" concludes with an allusion to "Picasso's portraits" calling them "a book of new faces", seeing in them the artist's genius of shedding "new light" on the prison-house of old ways, and allowing "new truths" we carry inside us to be born (Kosovel 1998: 159) – suggests he took inspiration from the cubist master, fashioning his sense of "the new artist" from such new perspectives. The revolution Picasso produced in the visual arts, summed up succinctly by Guillaume Apollinaire (one of the first people to champion Picasso's art) as "the world is as he newly represents it", applied also to literature, and Kosovel's aspirations in literature proceeded from that very same grappling with the question of representation.

The combination of brutality and graciousness that Apollinaire detects in Picasso's paintings stems from the artist's "technique" of singling out the various elements that make up an object (a face) and rearranging them into a dynamic composition of planes in such a way as to utterly disassemble it and yet not dispense with the semblance of nature, so that its effect on us, despite the strangeness of the

new object, is still "as intimate as that of nature itself' (Appollinaire 2001: 280). This combination, as will be shown, characterises Kosovel's most radical avant-garde experiments, his "kons" poems. The following famous short poem enacts the transition from the "traditional" to "avant-garde", but on the level of the content rather than form, and can be read as homage to one of Picasso's rearranged objects:

> My poem is an explosion,
> a wild raggedness. Disharmony.
> My poem doesn't want to reach you
> who by divine providence, divine will
> are dead aesthetes, museum moths,
> my poem is my face.

("My poem", Kosovel 2008: 47)

How a "lyrical painter" like Picasso – the term is Appolinaire's (2001a: 458) – featured in Kosovel's newly-derived artistic worldview can be gleaned from a journal entry in which his name appears in parenthesis next to the following statement: "Modern art searches for a synthesis". This notion Kosovel elaborates as "a bringing together of all our quests under the horizon of perfection" (CW 3: 763). If this is the artistic goal of modernity as Kosovel perceived it, then we can assume that the word "integral" – a synthesized or synergic whole – was for him a conceptualisation of this goal.

Before going on to consider the drama of this artistic search in relation to Tagore, one final comment on Kosovel's openness to new styles and energies. Kosovel's own geographic "in-betweeness", in which his Slovenianness as well as his Europeanness were not unproblematic givens but historically contested, afforded him a sensitiveness towards difference, even as he never stopped "pining" (reaching out in the manner of his pines) for a meaningful – integral – whole. In graphic terms, this receptiveness towards "an age" that he saw as "most exciting and most interesting in its multiplicity of idioms and trends in politics, economy and art" (CW 3: 178), could be described as both horizontal and vertical: horizontal in the sense that it practiced unabashed eclecticism, taking from across the board of new trends in poetry, incorporating principles also from the visual arts and music, and vertical in its – spiritual – insistence upon internalizing these influences, vitalizing them through lived experience so as to give them individual expression. "To widen the circle of one's understanding, not just by chance, but to seek new realizations, with

your soul, to live them" (CW 3: 730), [19] wrote Kosovel in 1925 in his journal, in what, to my mind, is an apt expression of his "universalist" philosophy. It certainly comes as no surprise to have him refer to Tagore's poetry collection *Vrtnar* (*The Gardener*) in the very next line. Ketaki Kushari Dyson has noted of Tagore that "it is his capacity for growth that marks him out as a modern" (1996: 16). The same, could be said of Kosovel, as it would be to claim what Michael Hamburger has written with regards to Rainer Maria Rilke, that it was the poet's "diverse experiments" that "made him a decidedly modernist poet, far in advance of his near-coevals" (1996: 98).

Going naked or disrobing the world?

In October 1925, seven months before his death, Kosovel wrote:

> Whoever chances on this book and reads it, let him not dismay too much over the velvety lyrics that were composed by the young man I have now parted with. They are indeed velvety lyrics! Golden stars all bedewed with spring rain, graves bedecked with white flowers ... Our poets and non-poets were not sending their books into the world with prefaces. At least not prefaces written by themselves ... But this age of ours is such that one has to apologize for the soft word shed by a fresh, young heart [...] for in an age when infernal machines are put on the altar of this global god [i.e. world capital], it is indeed odd for a young man to dare speak simply, plainly, softly because he happened to get lost on a balmy spring night and is wandering across the dream-filled landscape under the stars (CW 1: 413).

This was to be the opening paragraph of Kosovel's short preface to his first book of poems, *Zlati Čoln*. It rings with the ambivalence of his farewell from the "sentimental youth". Partly humoured and partly ironized, the young man is sent packing, but not without a profound sense of loss. The realization that he "has been run over and crushed by the wheel of time" and that his poems no longer possess the power to ring true nor rise above the clamour of the chaotic age is not a pretty one. It comes, moreover, with the imperative to assume new responsibilities towards the world and stop indulging in dream fantasies: "His hand still trembles in mine, still trying to pull away, evade the clutches of the world, but it cannot". Although Kosovel accepts the inevitability of their parting, he remains hopeful that a day may return when this young man can be resurrected. The concluding sentence suggests all

[19] Cf. Kosovel's letter to Maksa Samsa, 7/09/1925, CW 3: 561.

the trauma of farewell: "Only now that I am saying goodbye to you, can I feel how I am your brother ..." (*Ibid.*: 414)

Indeed, even as Kosovel came to wrestle with the question of which direction his poetry should take in this age of upheaval and scientific discovery, and embarked on what he called "an extreme path"[20] in poetry, he neither disowned his "velvety lyrics" nor lost a penchant for them.[21] In all its various guises, even the most daringly experimental ones, his poetry, as critics have unanimously pointed out, has persistently drawn on a set core of romantic concepts, amongst which "soul", "heart", "anguish", "beauty", "dreams", "solitude", and "eternity", to name a few recurring ones, proved to be unshakable constants, even if often ironized (Kos 2004: 164; Paternu 1985: 252). Kosovel's resolute endorsement of the "soft word" throughout his writings perhaps need not be seen as a paradox, as suggested by some commentators, an anomaly undermining his modernist experiment, if one allows for a version of modernism that resists Mallarmé's notorious ban on the word "heart" in poetry.[22]

Kosovel's "romantic" (v. Flaker 1982: 47-55) strikes me more as a self-conscious gesture, underpinned by the poet's critical stance and refusal to buy wholesale into novel creeds, even as he availed himself of new poetic devices and ideologies, becoming, as he put it in a poem, "an active spirit" who "collects impressions" ("Why Get Upset?, Kosovel 1998: 67).[23] Kosovel was indeed wholly committed to the here and now in the categories of the new – a real "follower of fashion", to put it crudely – but, even at only twenty he was neither as categorically opposed to the past nor as injunctive as was the official avant-garde line. When he

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[20] Here I am in disagreement with Vrečko's to my mind overly politicized interpretation of this word as meaning "socialist" and "revolutionary" (2004: 55). My sense of it is, in the context of Kosovel's usage elsewhere, that he meant it to refer to the latest, most modern developments in art (rather than politics), though no doubt he was a "Leftist" by conviction. For example, discussing the plan for the literary club, he wrote to a colleague: "In the literary part we will get to know all *modern* and *extreme* strivings and some great writers, poets and playwrights (letter to Vinko Košak, 02/08/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 224). Or: "With regards to poetry, I am now developing towards the most modern. Many perspectives are opening out to me" (letter to Fanica Obidova, 27/07/2005, in Kosovel 2006: 241.

[21] In the few letters where he mentions the book, he says how genuinely pleased he is with the collection, even as he has now moved on to new style(s). Cf. the letter to Obidova cited in the footnote above, and letter to Ivo Grahor, 15/08/25, in Kosovel 2006: 227.

[22] For an interesting distinction made between "naked" poetry and "pure" poetry, in which the former is understood as striving for wholeness and oneness with nature (Yeats, Jiménez), whereas a "pure" poet, such as Mallarmé, sees an irrevocable dichotomy between the mind and the body, and is preoccupied with the former, and purity of form, formal experimentation etc., cf. Wilcox 1983: 116-8.

[23] This can be demonstrated with Kosovel's endorsement of futurist principles, but not ideology, or his guarded response to Zenitism, whose evocations of the Barbarogenious, (a Balkan adaptation of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*) was invented as the Balkan's antidote to spiritually depleted Europe. (cf. Djurić: 68-79), did not appeal to him. For more cf. Ocvirk 1974: 704-5.

pronounced death upon the old, which he did time and again, he warned that this death must be "justified": it must do away with "what is stereotypical, chauvinist", but that which is "good", he was convinced, "never dies" (letter to Vinko Košak, 02/08/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 224). There is indeed ample evidence throughout his writings, not least in his poetry, that his position was a fiercely embattled one, but ultimately, no matter how adverse the circumstances, he upheld the belief which Tagore, in response to a charge that his poetry lacks realism, brilliantly defended in 1915 as the poet's prerogative – "The poet's verse will endlessly repeat the mantra: 'Truth is beauty, beauty truth!' (2001e: 279). By the same token – and like Tagore – Kosovel did not permit himself to be robbed of his faith in humanity. This conclusion of one of his many letters to his beloved feminist "confidante" sums it up:

> When the world robs you of your illusions and you 'sober up', you become the saddest person in the world. As cold as autumn. They've taken everything away from me except my belief: belief in humankind. Humankind to me is a sacred word (letter to Fanica Obidova, 01/09/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 242).[24]

The letter is postscripted: "I have just received a summons to the army tribunal in Trieste. As you can see, we live highly romantically!"

Part of Tagore's astute defence of poetry that celebrates "*jiva-lila*, the play of living creation" and names it "*lila*", play, rather than "the struggle of life" (2001e: 276), consists of his meditation on the linked phenomenon of joy and pain. Drawing on the Upanishads, he writes:

> [...] it is only because joy is the final truth that the world can endure pain and strife. Not just that, pain is the measure of joy. We know love to be true in proportion to the suffering it is able to bear. Thus suffering undoubtedly exists, but it exists because of the joy beyond it – or else there would be nothing, not even hatred and violence. When you acknowledge pain, you exclude joy; but by admitting joy, you do not rule out pain (*Ibid.*).

Kosovel pained and anguished extensively in his writing, and was, for the most part, quite literalist about it. Tagore, who had misgivings about such rawness in poetic expression would probably not have identified with this mode. Nevertheless, bearing

[24] In almost exact phrasing, these ideas are found in Kosovel's poem "Autumn Landscape" (Appendix B: 270)

in mind Tagore's perspective on life's suffering through a vital acknowledgment of joy, an admission which is not intended to diminish or obfuscate the reality of strife, but encourages one to see beyond the sense of discord and friction as the ultimate reality, we can see a side of Kosovel that is possibly underappreciated. What can be made of the concluding lines from the poem "Why Get Upset?" if not that Kosovel too refused "pain" or "suffering" to be the last word. The allusion to Tagore is telling:

> In the golden boat I coast.
> Drawing from suffering
> all that I need.
>
> (Kosovel 1998: 67-8)

Kosovel's perception of suffering as a vitalising force; his "obstinacy" in remaining enchanted with the world ("Facts drive art away": another line from the same poem); his refusal to see power struggle as primary reality – all bring him close to Tagore in sensibility, if clearly not in style. "Is beauty not impoverished if we cast aside the veil that reveals rather than obscures the beauty of creation?" Tagore put forth in his essay "Modern Poetry" (1932) when asked to present his ideas on the "modern versus Victorian" controversy then current among the literary circles. His response reveals a guarded view of literary modernism, one that is not keen on "publicly disrobing the world", particularly if such disrobing is no more than an expression of "a mannered poeticism in an inverted way", a fad rather than a fresh way of seeing (2001f: 282-3).

This, however, is not to say that Tagore's theory of modernism did not accommodate a search for the greater audacity and terseness of language characteristic of modern poets. On the contrary, the "bright and pure" seeing of "undeluded vision" that Tagore submits as the mark of the modern consciousness outside confines of time or geography, went hand in hand with his own poetic inclination towards a poetry of greater verbal economy (*Ibid.*: 288).[25] This direction is famously expressed in his poem No. 7 of the English *Gitanjali* (1912), a poem which has been shown to have infatuated Jiménez and Yeats, two of Tagore's

[25] Cf. Ayyub 1995 for a "defence" of Tagore's modernism, as also Bhabatosh Chatterjee's in-depth analysis of Tagore's "serious attempt to come to terms with the modernist mode" (1996: 10).

Western admirers, ringing true as it did to their own poetic re-orientations towards a poetry shorn of extraneous trappings. Here is Tagore's poem, in his translation:

> My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration. Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers.
>
> My poet's vanity dies in shame before thy sight. O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight,
> like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.
>
> (Tagore, EW 1: 44-5)

Robert Johnson seems to be the first Western critic who discussed the striking resemblance between this poem (as also the poem No. 8 from *Gitanjali*) and Yeats's poem "A Coat". Though published in 1914, "A Coat" was written in 1912, in the year Yeats met Tagore and collaborated with him on editing and introducing *Gitanjali* (Johnson 1965: 541). In what is almost a version of the Tagore poem, Yeats portends an aesthetic transformation with which he "abdicates the throne of the twilight" (MacNeice 1967: 108):

> I made my song a coat
> Covered with embroideries
> Out of old mythologies
> From heel to throat;
> But the fools caught it,
> Wore it in the world's eyes
> As though they'd wrought it.
> Song, let them take it,
> For there's more enterprise
> In walking naked.
>
> (Yeats 1985: 221)

Although also the outcome of a self-critical reappraisal of his early poetry, seen as deficient, if for nothing else (and as the poem suggests), because it was so easily imitable, Yeats's resolution to endorse a new "naked" style has been closely linked with the poet's shedding of illusions, both political and personal in nature (Ellman 1973: 84). It had little to do, as critics have pointed out, with experimental bravado or recklessness, for Yeats never experimented for the sake of experimentation. Doctrines of art for art's sake excluded nationality from literature, which for the Irish poet (as also for Kosovel) was unacceptable (Jeffares 1961: 28).

The closeness of the two poems on the level of metaphoric language and idea – even as Yeats's poem is more defiant in tone, has no reference to God and is terser in expression – is so striking that one is inclined to see more in this than just poetic coincidence. It seems fair to suggest that Tagore's poem, at least its first stanza, was a direct source of inspiration for Yeats, who then handled the image in his own way and developed the idea of "nakedness" more explicitly. Of course the concept of "naked poetry" brings to mind Juan Ramón Jiménez's famous exposition of *"La Poesía Desnuda"* in another paradigmatic poem that enacts and celebrates the simplicity and directness of poetic expression. The parallel, again, seems more than a happenstance and has been commented on by various critics.[26] Beginning with the famous *Vino, primero, pura, / vestida de inocencia* (She came, at first, pure / dressed in innocence), this poem is often understood in terms of a self-conscious elaboration of the entire evolution of Jiménez as a poet, from child-like innocence through the various stages of acquired sophistication of *no sé qué ropajes* (I know not what clothing) to a re-attainment of total nakedness (*"desnuda total"*) (Florit 1957: xxi). The theme of casting off unnatural disguise as an essential next step for poetry is handled, once again, with the metaphor of disrobing.

Since Jiménez, as Johnson informs us, "became interested in Yeats at about the same time that he began to translate Tagore", the echoes detected between the three poems offer enticing material for speculation on the impact of Tagore's poem for the poems of both Yeats and Jiménez. Scholars have been led to different conclusions. Johnson, for example, feels that "Jiménez is closer to Tagore than Yeats" (1965: 544), whereas Wilcox detects no more than superficial resemblances in the texture of Jiménez's and Tagore's poems, but "'deep' structural resemblance between Jiménez and Yeats" (1983: 512). Both, however, and rightly, refrain from drawing any easy conclusions as to the "influence" or direction in which the motive of "naked poetry" necessarily passed. What is, however, indisputable in this fascinating triangle of cross-literary correspondence is that something did come to pass between these three poets and left an indelible imprint on the poems of both Yeats and Jiménez. Since Tagore's poem was chronologically the first, and both Yeats and Jiménez became, for a time, intensely involved with his work rather than vice versa, it is only fair to assume that his was "the centre" from which the flame spread. And yet, had there been no sense of common ground, the spark would not have caught fire. The fact that within a striking temporal proximity of each other,

[26] Johnson 1965; Wilcox 1983; Mirza 1977: 10-15.

these four poets – for it is time to bring Kosovel and his *Golden Boat* preface into the picture again – each from his own specific background and angle of poetic vision, spanning East and West, were not only experiencing a critical juncture in their own artistic trajectories, but framed it in such similar paradigmatic terms, bespeaks rather a shared outlook made possible by global or cosmopolitan modernity, which all of them were negotiating from their respective peripheries in the largely pre-industrial societies of India, Ireland, Spain and Slovenia.

With respect to cosmopolitan modernity, we must at this point evoke Partha Mitter's concept of "virtual cosmopolis" to denote the shared terrain of modern ideas with which the elites of "the centre" and "the periphery" were critically engaging "on the level of the intellect and creativity". Borrowing from Benedict Anderson the idea of "imagined community" based on print culture, Mitter's "virtual cosmopolis" helps explain how the members of this global community "may never have known one another personally, and yet shared a corpus of ideas on modernity". For example, artists and intellectuals worldwide may have found themselves united in a front against urban industrial capitalism, or in a "quest for an alternative to materialism." It is mostly through virtual cosmopolitanism that Indian artists could discern clear parallels between their own resistance to Western imperialism and Western avant-garde critics of European civilization, or, as importantly, the other way round (Mitter 2007: 11-12).

Was it not then this same trans-national space of ideas and forms that enabled Kosovel, who travelled little but read widely, to so readily respond to Tagore, as he felt himself to be on a similar quest for an alternative to materialism? Of course the outcomes of these quests were far from uniform, as were the reasons underlying them or the goals they were put to. If in painting "global primitivism" was one critical form of modernity, its main object of criticism for Western primitivism, as Mitter points out, was the predicament of urban modernity, whereas in India, primitivism was primarily deployed as a critique of colonial culture. In fact the "cosmopolitan" and heterogeneous character of the avant-garde needs yet to be properly recognized, in the same way that global modernity must be understood more in terms of a "two-way dialogic transaction" between the West and non-West with "multilateral and multi-axial origins" (*Ibid.*: 13). The kind of intellectual or "soul" community surmised between Tagore, Yeats, Jiménez, and Kosovel, and inscribed into their poetic variations of the same trope clearly defies any simplistic view of cultural influence as a one-way flow of ideas from the West to other cultures. If

anything, in this particular case, it is rather the reverse story of "the modern European enchantment with Eastern thought and art" (Johnson 1965:540).

Kosovel's enchantment with Tagore was in some ways typical of the dominant Western perceptions of an Eastern "sage", and drew on aspects of the same language commonly used to refer to Tagore throughout the West. Some of the qualities Kosovel perceived in Tagore, notions such as "simplicity", "naturalness", "child-likeness", as also his comparing the power of Tagore's language to that of the gospels (CW 3: 509, 558, 561) – were all part of a stock of attributes that guided the imaginations of Europeans when they turned towards the East in the early decades of the twentieth century, and which have since been criticized for their orientalizing thrust.[27] Kosovel's most explicit tribute to Tagore in his creative writing, the poem called "In Green India", which imagines the Indian poet dwelling "among silent trees" in a symbolist meditation on timelessness and life caught "like eternity [...] in a tree", is a clear case in point (Appendix B: 271). But to stop here would be to stop short of appreciating why Tagore was so important to Kosovel or how those concepts might have actually contributed to the project of self-emancipation both poets shared. For all the enthusiasm the young poet felt towards his older Indian contemporary, there was nothing of blind veneration in the way he perceived him. Rather Kosovel studied his poetry and his philosophical writings seriously, taking "lessons" from him when they struck a chord, and urging others to do the same. Significantly, when works were not yet available in the Slovenian translation, as was the case with *Nationalism*, *Sadhana* and *Personality*, he got hold of them in other European languages, primarily German.[28] From the exchange of letters that passed between him, his family, friends and associates, many of whom were at the time living abroad (in Munich, Paris, Prague, and Trieste), it becomes clear that there was in fact a whole group of young Slovenian writers, musicians and artists who responded to Tagore from a deeply-felt creative need that went beyond mere fashion.

For Kosovel, reading Tagore meant encountering a voice that shared some of the age's deepest cultural and intellectual concerns, spanning nationalism, scientific and technological revolutions, environmentalism and feminism alike, and that helped him articulate both a critique of Europe and portend a solution to it. Coming from a

[27] Cf. pp. 133-5 for the previous discussion of the various dimensions to "Orientalism".

[28] From his letters and journals it can be established that he read *Sadhana* in German, as also *Personality* ("*Persönlichkeit*", CW 3: 683), but *Nationalism* was available to him in German or Croatian (tr. Antun Barac), both published in 1922. Poetry, however, he read in Gradnik's Slovenian translations. For the bibliographical detail of Sl. translations of *Stray Birds*, *The Gardener*, *Fruit-Gathering*, and *Gitanjali*, cf. Bibliography.

poet rather than a social scientist, as well as from a mind in its youth, his critique carries a good deal more emotional than theoretical weight. Indeed, it is a poem such as "Ecstasy of Death" that marks its fuller realization rather than any one essay Kosovel wrote on the subject. And the relationship between freedom and language – particularly in the context of political oppression – becomes the space in which new identities can be imagined and the pursuit of social justice envisioned (cf. Kosovel's poem "Italian Culture" or Tagore's poem "Africa").

It is the crossing of formal boundaries in language that opens a way to freedom of thought and self-expression, forming an integral part of the continual re-creation of cultural meanings through which individuals and societies effectively bring about change (cf. Williams 1961: 19-56). At times of social upheaval and rapid modernization, the "crisis" of language, as seen from our discussion, is felt with particular urgency. Questions as to which road poetry should take and what its destination should be were for Kosovel of paramount concern in an age which he perceived as dangerously dominated by the machine and devoid of basic humanity (cf. his manifesto "To the Mechanics"). A war that started on horseback and ended with tanks threw this into a disturbingly sharp relief. The artistic junction Kosovel meditated upon in the preface to *Zlati čoln* meant having to discard received meanings and forms (his "velvety lyrics") and create new ones. This raises the question of to what extent Kosovel was prepared to jettison meaning, break with tradition and "go naked".

Quest for meaning

In the fall of 1925, roughly at the same time at which he wrote his preface to the *Golden Boat*, Kosovel jotted down these thoughts in his journal: "Do you write with your heart? / No, with a pen. But what comes not from the soul will not reach the soul [...]" (CW 3: 735). This short dialogue reveals the poet's intention to offer means of communication freed of sentimental trappings while retaining the power of description born out of lived – "soul" – experience. In Aristotelian terms, the *techné* or craft of writing is an essential but insufficient condition for *poïesis*. Poetry detached from life as it is lived, Kosovel suggests, will not move; it will not bring forth what he argued all good art should – "a living realization" (*Ibid.*: 96). From this it follows that, if a poem (or art in general) is to succeed, much depends on the artist's ability to transmit his experience in a way that enables that experience to be

actively re-lived in those to whom it is offered. That in turn will depend on the artist's own ability to live the experience in the first place: "the secret of new forms", writes Kosovel, "lies in living the experience" (*Ibid.*).[29]

There can be in that sense no separation between "content" and "form" but rather, as the poet argues, it is the content that creates its own form (*Ibid.*: 104). Without a personal verification, or without what Kandinsky often wrote and spoke about as the "inner necessity" that drives every artist to create (in Whitford 1991: 98), the artist is likely to lapse into superficial imitation and the work of art to fall short of its function to communicate, which is to say, on another level, to fall short of its intention to transform the existing world of relationship.[30] We should not go to "new art" for its novelty in form, Kosovel asserted, but for what it can tell us about "man" (CW 3: 105).

Not always easy to grasp Kosovel's ideas, his basic understanding of the role of a creative mind vis-à-vis society appears straightforward enough. The individual and his environment, Kosovel is saying, are locked into a relationship whereby they interactively transform each other. The artist takes from the environment, creates his form which in turn recreates him and his environment (*Ibid.*: 100).[31] It is the compulsion, moreover, to retain a "vital" relationship with one's surroundings – in that sense Kosovel was a real "vitalist" – that I see as underlying his extraordinary literary metamorphoses as a poet. It also explains his pre-eminent concern with the present and its host of new literary idioms. These liberated creative expression, and in doing so not only bridged the gap between "life" and "art" but also freed real potential for changing the world. Kosovel of course was not alone in his optimism about the possibilities of art as a vehicle for social change, or in projecting a vision of a world based on what he evoked as "the high ethical ideal of *equality between all people and nations*" (italics in original, CW 3: 65). Such and other similar utopian proclamations were part of the moral reorientation of the (young) generation that survived the war and refused to be shattered by it:

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[29] I find Raymond William's discussion of the communicative function of art useful here. "By living the experience we mean that, whether or not it has been previously recorded, the artist has literally made it part of himself, so deeply that his whole energy is available to describe it and transmit it to others" (1961: 50).

[30] Cf. Kosovel: "New art is on its way – it marches in most varied uniforms – and now we are faced with a vital question: Where? Today after this slogan, tomorrow after that? [...] If we follow *ourselves* and not *fashion*" (emphasis author's, CW 3: 101). Kosovel disapproved of some young poets in Slovenia who in his view were trying to copy Tagore's style, for example Gaspari in his collection *Cvetoča pisma* ("*Blossoming letters*") (letter to Samsa, 7/09/1925, CW 3: 561).

[31] Cf. his essay „*Kaj je kulturno gibanje?*" ("What is a Cultural Movement?"), CW 3: 56-7.

> "I no longer know what beauty is!" cries modern man. He knows about history and understands the relative nature of beauty in different ages. But beyond this relativism there must be something, something absolute (Kosovel, CW 3: 99).

It was only against an ideal that the crumbled world could be somehow pieced together again. The tension between this fundamental intuition of an absolute reality and the relativism of the manifest world – what Kosovel elsewhere described as the gap between "I" capitalized and "i" in small letters, or between what "Is" and what "is" (Letter to Karmela 01/01/1924, in CW 3: 503) – runs through most of his creative work and is played out, as in this poem, with strong implications.

> I speak with you, yet I am far from you.
> A shadow grew to a thousand shadows.
> I can't tell myself apart, or know myself.
> How then can I know where?

The sense of the speaker's disorientation looms large in a universe visibly robbed of God's presence, in a dominion ruled by shadows and death.

> Cold ashes lie with the shadows.
> Nerves exhausted
> from my own vague shape.
> God. I don't know his face.

A sense of direction (the answer to the question "Where?"), however, emerges in the next stanza, with an awakening of social consciousness:

> One thing burns: a thirst for Justice and Liberation.
> One thing sacred: the Simple, True.

The juxtaposition and complementarity of these two lines, the first one referring to social reality and the second to the world of art where simplicity and truthfulness are extolled as supreme virtues, is significant for a poet for whom artistic and political revolution were one and the same. For this social critic disturbed by the changes in the European mentality between the two wars, the high ideal is painfully at odds with the perceived reality lacking in rigour and imagination:

But above us
the melancholy greys of pavement
like corpses that cannot die.

The poem ends on a note of unmistakable disdain:

P. S. I know, you cannot understand.

("Ecce Homo", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

The poem "Ecce Homo", as I read it, enacts what Kosovel described in one of the most frequently cited of his letters as a shift, a turning point, from "absolute negation, nihilism [...] to the positive side" (letter to Obidova, 27/7/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 222). When the mood of the first two stanzas changes from despondency into an active liberationist stance; when the metaphysical perspective, as it were, is displaced by a critical social gaze, then creative work – the striving for truth and simplicity – becomes a surrogate for the distant God. Truth, as Kosovel writes in the same letter, becomes two-dimensional as opposed to one, and life enters the logic of a paradox: the simplicity Kosovel exalts in art is not straight-forward simplicity but a Tagorean simplicity which is attained on the back of greatest complexity. This adopted "paradoxical" stance is a celebration of relativeness – "*Relativeness makes world beautiful and human endeavour great*" (emphasis author's) – that does not dispense with "the absolute" but translates its absence into a generator of self-perfection through creative work.[32] For Kosovel this meant stepping into the vanguard of a *literary* revolution,[33] the goal of which was to capture the demise of one world and the birth of another. "How and why", he emphasized time and again, "is the task for every individual" (*Ibid.*: 223-4).

The subject of this transition is taken up in another poem that can in itself be seen as a transitional poem, framed within the traditional rhymed and scanned

[32] Telling in this respect is the follow-up to Kosovel's meditation on the difference between ideal and lived life (between "I" and "i") in the letter to his sister Karmela mentioned above: "For me [this gap] is precisely the cause for my work, I want to bridge it, so I am building the bridge [...]". Kosovel was also fond of technical/technological metaphors for creativity – cons/construction/constructivist – derived from Černigoj and the Bauhaus (to be discussed shortly).

[33] I emphasize the word "literary", since interpreters have persistently taken several sentences out of this letter to substantiate Kosovel's alleged "turn" into "active" politics, ignoring statements such as: "We must of course understand what is going on in *politics*, but my work is in *literature*!" (emphasis Kosovel's).

poetics but declaring an ideational shift from the past into the present. Correspondingly, it evokes the archetypal crossing figure of a boatman – "the golden boatman" – and we can begin to appreciate the relevance and potency this metaphor held for Kosovel. The boatman takes out his golden boat for a leisurely ride "across the red waters of evening". As he is coasting along the "grassy shore", a storm is suddenly whipped up. The sun is made to fall "from its height" and the world, rather than sunken in darkness (elsewhere a common Kosovel trope), comes into its own:

> as though everything else,
> less golden, shone forth
> more clearly, more alive.

Relativity is presented as positively invigorating and the poet as boatman – having survived the tempest and having himself fallen from his own Parnassus heights – is able to step ashore with a renewed sense of worldly purpose:

> Red clouds tore
> from my heart.
> I saw them,
> followed them
> across the world.
>
> ("*Vozil sem se*" ["I Went for a Ride"], tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

Kosovel's new sense of direction, both as outcome of personal growth and as product of historical inevitability, could be interpreted as a new work ethic.[34] His position is made clear in a letter to Grahor: "I work. Life is tragic only in one instance: if it is ignorant and sheltered" (31/08/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 239). Kosovel's *raison de etre* of human beings is clear: "I live, therefore I can create". The model of authenticity is dropped in favour of a model of creativity. "History", according to the poet, "does not repeat itself, but it creates itself", so rather than turning to the past for "our model" we should create it "in the living present we feel inside us" (CW 3: 100).

We have come full circle in pointing to some of the main ideas that preoccupied Kosovel and which, if not directly entering his poetry, certainly motivated his artistic search, for, as I proceed to argue, it was in the sphere of the

[34] "Work – that is our ethics and art our religion: religion of the greatest beauty mankind has created. / My perspective is the perspective of the soul" (Kosovel, Journal, CW 3: 698).

relationship between the artist and his medium that Kosovel's struggle for "new man" and "new artist" began to be played out. This struggle, if genuine, is more often than not a painful one. Creative agony, as Raymond Williams asserts, should be taken quite literally and not merely as a romantic hyperbole. Neurologists, he says, have shown that the process of internal organization of new sensory experience and the effort this process entails is tantamount to what we understand by "physical pain" (Williams 1961: 43-3). Robbed of language as he knew it, Kosovel faced the painful task of refashioning himself –

> But look, I have nothing left,
> my heart's an altar cracked in half,
> my words are all wounds.
> Each one of them bleeds.
>
> (cf. Appendix B: 272)

– and was disheartened by a sense of one's limitations, as in the following lines from another poem:

> It's not you who will tame the world
> and sink in silence, one with time.
> Scorched with pain, you will long
> with a voice cracked raw.
>
> (cf. Appendix B: 273)

Clearly, the separation of "the pen" from "the heart" spelt out a crisis in which a language needed to be lost in order to be regained. How gravely Kosovel felt this is evident from the sheer number of poems he wrote dealing with the subject of poetry, often with the same kind of directness and resolve we noted in the Tagore / Yeats / Jimenez complex. The following is a particularly good example:

> You have to wade through a sea
> of words to come
> to your self. Then alone,
> forgetting all speech,
> go back to the world.

In *Gitanjali* poem no. 12, similar insight is offered by Tagore:

> The traveller has to knock on every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

Kosovel, in the same poem:

> He finds a new word;
> Today, it's not clear
> what your word is.

Tagore again:

> It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.

Kosovel:

> Speak as the solitude speaks,
> with unutterable mystery.

Putting these two poems in dialogue serves two purposes. The first is extrinsic to the poems themselves and can be made as an aside on the formal direction of Kosovel's writing in relation to Tagore's *Gitanjali* and other translated works. The second and more interesting of the two, however, turns on the deeper unities that link these two poems and poets together.

One of the formal innovations Kosovel came to adopt in a substantial body of his poetry is free verse. The constraints of rhyme and metre seem to have been the first casualties in a process of cutting down on poetic embellishments that eventually led Kosovel to a radical democratization of poetic discourses whereby mathematical and chemical signs, political slogans, journalism and everyday speech were seamlessly interwoven into the loosened fabric of the poem.[35] It also led him into the prose poem, that hybrid genre where, as Tagore put it, "prose is touched by the

[35]See the poem "Rhymes", another "manifesto" poem to record this shift (Appendix B: 274). There is, however, no clear-cut logic to Kosovel's use of rhyme. In poem "Kons XY" (Appendix B: 276), for example, new diction and traditional rhyme are exploited to maximum effect, and Kosovel availed himself of "traditional" poetic techniques to the end. For more on Kosovel's deployment of scansion, cf. Novak 2004.

essence of verse and verse by the seriousness of prose" (2001g: 334). It is here that we must note that Tagore's English *Gitanjali* (fully published in Slovenian in 1924) alongside his other translated poetry collections came to Kosovel as an instance of this new genre, for Tagore, as is well known, translated his own formally intricate and adhering verse into a kind of prose-poetry long before he had himself begun writing prose poems in Bengali. Looking back on this, Tagore sees one possible reason for the popularity of his English *Gitanjali* in the fact of their prose incarnation. At a time of growing popularity of the prose-poem in Europe, the English poets, he writes, were ready to accept his translations "as part of their own literature" (*Ibid.*: 333). With respect to Kosovel, it is possible to show that alongside the more evident literary antecedents, such as Charles Baudelaire,[36] Tagore's "presence" can be traced, both in content and form, in a number of Kosovel's lyrical works now designated as prose poems.[37]

The other observation that can be derived from the interleaved reading of Kosovel's "Ecce Homo" and Tagore's *Gitanjali* 12 relates to what I regard as one the more fundamental beliefs of both poets: the belief that as human beings we are endowed with the faculty of self-perfection and that this self-perfection of individuals (and the human species at large) must be pursued through cultural transmission (knocking on every alien door in Tagore's poem, wading a sea of words in Kosovel's). But the long convoluted journey thus undertaken is as much an inward as it is an outward one, vertical as it is horizontal. Both poems articulate a direction in which reaching "an innermost chamber" (Tagore) or "a self" (Kosovel) is seen as the ultimate goal. It constitutes a personal quest for truth, a striving to penetrate some essential quality behind manifest phenomena (a theme recurrent in Tagore's *Gitanjali* and elsewhere) where language is tested at its very limits: on the border of ineffability ("unutterable mystery" in Kosovel; "utter simplicity" in Tagore).

Kosovel came to rephrase for himself the whole enterprise of modern art in explicitly teleological terms, conceiving it as "religion of modern life". In contrast to the scientific – "objective" and partial – view of the world, he saw art endowed with the "religious" task of elucidating "wholeness", evoking a sense of man's essential

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[36] Pavel Karlin's translation of Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* came out in 1923 under the title *Charles Baudelaire: Pesmi v prozi* [Poems in prose]. For other connections and related issues cf. cvirk *CW 2*: 659-65.

[37] The poems "*Novemu življenju naproti*" ("Towards New Life",99-100), "*Metulj na oknu*" ("Butterfly on a Window", 40), "*Kozmično življenje*" ("Cosmic Life", 60), "*Umetnik* "("Artist", 68),"*Daleč*" ("Far", 114), all carry something of a Tagore air about them. The page numbers refer to the collection of prose poems in Kosovel 1991.

communion with nature and cosmos. More often than not, this communion was not harmonious, and art should testify to both "creation and destruction". In Kosovel's view "disharmony" was a constituent part of the process of "the rhythm of cosmos" and he welcomed "the conflict between various life's forces and forms" as a stimulus for "movement and growth" (CW 3: 95-7). When obstacles got in the way of physical life, he noted elsewhere – attributing this to something he had read of Tagore's – "a means to a new, higher form of spiritual life" presented itself (*Ibid.*: 651).

Kosovel's religious "doctrine" of art was vitalist and individualist, not only in opposition to all forms of dogmatization or institutionalization – "All art must be a-confessional and a-political" (*Ibid.*: 95) – but also, as we have seen, based on the necessary coalition between everyday life and the activity of thought and expression. It is the dignity that a spiritual lens accorded the everyday and the mundane that so attracted Kosovel to Tagore's poetry and perhaps contrary to the expectations of those who might see in this no more than an infatuation with an otherworldly allure, the effect Tagore's poetry had on Kosovel, totally in step with the Indian poet's own affirmative stance on life, is that it set him more resolutely on the path of this-worldly affairs. It is worth noting that the one colour that crops up regularly in Kosovel's poetry and can be argued to hold associative links with Tagore, beside the obvious gold, is green (cf. "In green India"), and green for Kosovel was the colour of life, joy, action, regeneration and promise of a new world.

The following excerpt from a letter Kosovel wrote to a young aspiring woman poet of his generation, Maksa Samsa, who sought him out after finishing high school as a "mentor" for her first attempts at writing poetry, [38] is perhaps the most elaborate example that conveys the power of vision Kosovel derived from Tagore:

> Read Tagore's poems and study them! There you will encounter the cosmic perspective of our lives. There you will learn what a person can experience if they truly live and not live merely on borrowed time. There you will understand that there is no need to avoid the mundane and the everyday; we just need to get through it, understand it. There is really just one thing to understand: even the most seemingly isolated little village is a part of the cosmos. I too am a spiritual centre of my own living cosmos vibrating in the soul that I come to understand through snatches of experience. There are no

[38] Kosovel and Samsa exchanged a number of letters from November 1924 up until Kosovel's death in May 1926. Most of them mention Tagore (cf. CW 3: 552-64).

> miracles in this world, because everything there is, is a miracle and miraculous. But enough of this (19/08/1925, CW 3: 558-9).

This conception of everyday existence as being in some sense a part of a much larger and meaningful whole – in other words, this perception of a universal dimension to our individual lives – is no doubt the one crucial "message" Kosovel imbibed and reaffirmed through his reading of Tagore. It is an insight that helped him face personal trials and life's privations (cf. "Bread"), as it also lent expression to his democratic aspirations and led him to assertions of individual dignity beyond the terms of class, ethnicity or other social divisions: "in our innermost being, there are no classes or nations" (CW 3: 102). "Whatever life it may be, the main thing is for me to live it". It is on this affirmative stance towards, and respect for, people's lives in general that Kosovel derived inspiration from Tagore: "Every person's life is important, and Tagore is right in saying that human existence is justified by the mere fact that we live it" (*Ibid.*: 78).

While this deeply humanist orientation extended his sympathies to the peasant and the worker, it also made him perceive artistic labour as fundamentally linked with ordinary social activities and recognize in it a powerful force that directs people's lives as much as do politics and economy (*Ibid.*: 86). Art in that sense cannot be viewed in isolation, as a separate domain of aesthetics, but needs to be regarded in coexistence with, in Kosovel's words, "other cultural sectors of the great cultural circle: economy, politics, religion [and] science" (*Ibid.*: 57), in turn becoming "an aesthetic, ethical, social, religious, revolutionary, in other words, problem of life" (*Ibid.*: 650). Culture is no longer perceived as confined to the prerogative of "cultural workers" but is the domain for the "participation of *everyone*" (emphasis author's, *Ibid.*: 56). Its terms are what Williams put forth as "a whole way of life" in which art and politics, science and religion, economy and family life are wedded together in "a whole world of active and interacting relationships" and where institutionalized meanings are constantly being tested, subverted and displaced by creative thought and interpretation (1961: 55-6). With this we can finally approach Kosovel's avant-garde creativity.

Between destruction and construction

When Kosovel worked to translate into practice his poetic vision that valued what was human beyond everything else, he aimed for what he called "contemporary unadorned art" (CW 3: 101) that would not only penetrate the "real face of things", but reflect man in his nakedness. This "naked man" as he put it would be disrobed of "lies [...] romantic ecstasies [and] empty phrases". In the context of Kosovel's criticism of European civilization and the violence it perpetrated against its others both outside and within Europe, this meant breaking the mould of the old "romantically sentimental *humanism*" to strive for new humanism where "the elementary face of man" would replace this mask of "civilization" (emphasis author's, *Ibid.*: 104; 96). This elementary face Kosovel predictably – and romantically – linked with the peasant and the worker, who in his view stood for the aspiring traits of strength, resilience and a healthy moral direction (*Ibid.*: 60).

The German philosopher Nietzsche, whom Kosovel read and may have had in mind in conceiving his poem *Ecce Homo*, argued in a similar manner that "truth ha[d] to cast off the trumpery garments of supposed reality of civilized man" (cited in Wilcox 1983: 517).[39] Stripping away all mannerisms was thus for Kosovel the logical step in undermining the humanist rhetoric that supported the edifice of the liberal-bourgeois society, a step that had both political and ethical implications. Characteristically for Kosovel, this task rested with every individual:

> Each one of us must get through their own inner revolution, to be revitalized, to have their coat of hypocrisy torn off, so that they are finally able to take in with every pore of their body the sharp but healthy air of truth, openness. That is the condition and foundation of *new* man, and only *new* man will be able to create *new* art (emphasis author's, CW 3: 98-9).

With this end in view, the artist could avail himself of any available means, express himself pictorially or linguistically, as long as he was tuned into the goal of, in Kosovel's vocabulary, "seeking the soul" and lending his ear to what "this downtrodden man, this humiliated and desecrated man [within us] is saying" (CW 3: 105). The outer perspective needed to be replaced by an inner vision, a static view of the world by a dynamic conception, and a fixed perspective by a shifting point-of-view in a process, the prime object of which, Kosovel argued, was no longer the

[39] For more on Nietzcshe and Kosovel, cf. Kos 2003.

creation of beauty in the traditional romantic sense (something exalted and removed from life) but to provoke in us a sense of "the real" and "the true" in what we experience:

> [...] Aesthetics is no longer a discipline about objects that are lovely or unlovely, but one on the intensity of connection we feel with these objects (Letter to Karmela, 1/12/1924, in Kosovel 2006: 146-7)

In other words, meaning and significance are constructed rather than discovered as existing objectively out there. They are relational – and this shift in outlook and artistic practice has in theory been described as a shift from an art whose representational practice is mimetic to an art that is "ontologically-constructivist" in that it enacts – performs – what it represents (Pogačnik 1984: 167).

Before we go on to consider an example of the poetry that Kosovel wrote in line with his understanding of "constructivism" where the content and form are inseparably wed, one reinforcing the other (CW 3: 13), it must be noted that the aesthetic ideal of truth as beauty mentioned earlier is very much a Tagorean constatation (in the letter from which the excerpt above is taken, Tagore is one of the key references). At first sight entirely an outgrowth of romantic ideology, this Keatsian concept, was interestingly inverted by Tagore. As Tagore grew critical of western aestheticism, believing it to be "a sort of sectarianism" separating out values as though they were detached from the whole of life, he would always refer to "Beauty is truth" in the reverse: "Truth is beauty". This reversal signals a meaningful shift in perspective: it places what is true and real above the aspiration to create the beautiful in art (Roy 2002: 69). Put in another way, what is true may not be beautiful in the conventional sense of the term but it is nevertheless beautiful because it is true. In a late poem Tagore wrote "Truth is hard, / and I loved the hard: / it never deceives" (Tagore 2003a: 222). He also says, "In blood's alphabet / I saw my countenance"; a line that could be Kosovel's. Indeed "art is not a pleasure trip, it is a battle [and] a way of self-discovery" (Roy 2002: 69).

It is above all, as both poets insisted, an emotional journey. If poetry was to be a most direct expression of reality (social, physical and spiritual), and grip a person's heart *and* mind, as Kosovel hoped it would (cf. "Rhymes"), then genuine communication depended on curbing the referential meaning of words, allowing

them to speak afresh.[40] Tagore, it seems, began to feel this problem with greater urgency towards the end of his creative life, when he not only took up painting to express himself in an alternative, non-verbal medium (a function in part already fulfilled in his vast body of songs) but also wrote a number of books of nonsense verse.[41] Kosovel, on the other hand, in a manner visibly indebted to the poetic techniques of the European avant-gardes with which he fruitfully engaged, but in a spirit and intention very much in consonance with Tagore, came to negotiate the question of meaning in poetry in a way that is uniquely his own. Let us consider one example from the body of his avant-garde writing:

Our windows are barred.
White barricades.
The American Indians know nothing
of gravity.
But dynamite explodes
in Novaja Zemlja*, too.
You, Sir, in the astrakhan cap!
There is no arithmetic mean
between the old and the new worlds.
One is either old or young.
A golden boat on the horizon.
Natural laws ≡ ethics ???
The cosmos could be understood
even without physics.
People swinging hanged
from telegraph poles**.
Entrance: one dinar***.
It is raining.
Man talks to the cosmos.
A barn outside the window.

("Talk at Twilight", Kosovel 1998: 58)

**Novaja Zemlja* means "the New World" in Russian but is also the name of an island in the Arctic Sea.

** As a motif, hangings crop up in several Kosovel's avant-garde poems and are related to political events in Bulgaria when in May 1925 several men, held responsible for the assault on the cathedral of St. Nedelya in Sophia, were publicly hanged, an event reported in Slovenian newspapers. In another article, Kosovel could also have read that seventeen people were awaiting death by hanging in the city of Osijek (in present-day Croatia) (Ocvirk 1974: 586-7).

***In mid-June 1925, Ljubljana saw the arrival of the Russian Kludsky Circus. The entry fee was one dinar. Kosovel glued the original ticket as part of the title of the poem he wrote following the

[40] Cf. Tagore: "That words have meanings is just the difficulty. That is why poets have to turn and twist them in metre and rhyme, so that meaning may be held somewhat in check and feeling allowed to express itself" (2003b: 271).

[41] See his late poem "On My Birthday – 20", (Tagore 1994: 124), for example, in which the poet imagines languages to have broken free of constraint and "words shot of their meaning". Cf. also Radice's commentary to the poem on pp. 176-8.

occasion, "Kludsky Circus, Seat 461",(Appendix B: 275), exploiting it for a meditation on on nature vs. culture, man vs. machine, man vs. animal (cf. also Kons XY).

This poem radically contradicts the principle of compositionality that presupposes a logical progression of a particular motif and a perspective that is largely fixed, identifiable and homogenous. In this poem it is not clear who, or where, the speaker is; the lyrical subject is decentred and deterritorialized (cf. Juvan 2005: 198-99), defying expectations raised by the romantic title with its promise of a dialogue or conversation. Instead the text is made up of snatches of more or less autonomous and unrelated information in what is a radically open, even unfinished composition. This random sequencing of images suggests a world lacking in connection, where man is at the disposal of things – the products of the industrial age (barricades, dynamites, telegraphy) – where connections and relations are yet to be forged. Correspondingly the style is heavily nominalised, telegrammatic, pared down, drawing on code systems outside traditional poetic language, traversing the vocabulary of science ("arithmetic mean"), journalism (reference to people being hanged), public notices ("Entrance: one dinar") as well as pure lyricism (the title and final line). There is no apparent hierarchy between these various idioms legitimised by the poet's (dis)ordering consciousness, which throws them up as baffling snippets of lived / observed / read / imagined reality that oscillate between intimate, public, planetary and cosmic spaces. It is worth noting here that Kosovel's frequent reference to foreign places and peoples throughout his avant-garde verse (Morocco, China, India, France, etc.) as also very often to personal names, some closer to home than others (Einstein, Stravinsky, Tagore, Gandhi, etc.), not to mention to the political vocabulary (slogans, paroles, personalities, events), not only draws his poetry at times very close to reportage but is in itself a product of mass media and print culture.

In an important respect, the "real life" that Kosovel draws upon in his writing is mediated to him through newspapers, journals, books and cinema: it is in that sense both textual and virtual. New technological developments (the coming of electricity, automobile, telephone etc.) enter his poetry as signifiers of contemporary civilization and open it up to reflections upon the wider world. In subject matter and formal treatment, Kosovel moves outside the tradition of Slovenian poetry, even as in an important sense, he also continues it.

For all the jumbled nature of textual construction, to come back to the poem "Talk at Twilight", Kosovel neither dispenses with the meaning of individual words

in the manner of, for example, the Russian Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov and his "*заум*/zaum" poetic experimentations,[42] nor does he forgo the meaning of the poem as a whole. Rather he makes it simultaneously operative on two levels, where the semantic gap between the referential meaning of disjointed fragments and the hidden meaning of a derived – integrated – whole needs to be bridged by the active participation of the reader. The aesthetic distance between the text and the reader thus annulled, the undermining of meaning (through decontextualisation and fragmentation) serves the purpose of its reassembling: destruction and construction, disintegration and integration are two sides of the same coin. Since a completed whole can never be derived from the various fragments that have been taken out of their original contexts, what can emerge is a dynamic whole, subject to perpetual change (cf. Tokarz 2005: 169-70). The transition from the old world to the new suggested by the word "twilight" and further underlined in lines eight and nine, lies in widening out the interpretative possibilities of the world through the struggle for meaning and the forging of relations ("talk"). A poem becomes an instrument of emancipation.[43]

Kosovel's most radical writing: his leap into unbounded poetry that included also experimentation with typography and "pictorial poetry", marks an attempt to materialize, in his words, "the idea of constructive affirmation of life" in the aftermath of "nihilistic negation" experienced by his generation (journal, CW 3: 650). His manner and the various procedures he employed are in direct correlation with the avant-garde trends of the 1920s – connections widely explored by critics but which cannot be traced in greater detail here[44] – but much of the conceptual and spiritual vigour behind these poems points to Tagore, whom Kosovel read throughout his creative life, right up to the months before his death, as a vital source of inspiration:[45]

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[42]Translated into English as "transreason", but literally made up of the prefix *за* = "behind" & *ум* = "the mind".

[43] Peter Bürger's classical account of the avant-garde points out the contradictions inherent in the historical avant-garde movements' negation of the autonomy of art and its corresponding dream of the integration of art into the praxis of life. If the distance between the two is done away with – i.e. praxis is aesthetic and art is practical – then art's purpose can no longer be discovered; the distance, he suggests, is a prerequisite for "that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable." (1992: 57-63 [63]). An extreme example of "practical" art would be art as commodity, the purpose of which is to enslave rather than emancipate.

[44] On the nature of the destructive-constructive principle, cf. among others Pogačnik 1984:163-9; Brazzoduro 1984.

[45] Significantly, from Kosovel's correspondence it can be derived, that the summer and autumn of 1925, which has been established as the period which gave birth to some of Kosovel's more radical

> I seek meaning everywhere, in every step, in every thought, in every word that expresses my life, every heart-beat, every breath. Again I want to understand Tagore, who is so full of that simple greatness, who is a child and a human being [...] I am after entirely new ways, perhaps I will find them (letter to Karmela, 20/12/1924, CW 3: 509).

The "entirely new ways" Kosovel sought he most dramatically realized in a body of poems he called "Kons", the title being also an abbreviated form for the constructivist journal "*Konstruktor*" ("Constructor"), which he was planning to launch in 1924 with the artist friend, Avgust Černigoj, of whom more will be said shortly. Although many of the most radical poems are indeed to be found in this group of nineteen poems linked by the title Kons in its various permutations ("Kons: ABC", "Kons: Cat", "KONS KONS KONS" "Kons: 4" etc.), Kosovel's avant-gardism is neither confined to this group nor in fact intrinsic to it. Some, such as the poem "Kons", are executed in a traditional lyrical vein, and many are a combination of old formal properties (rhyme, stanzaic structure, fixed lyrical subject) with new moods and subjects in what seems to be a striving for a deliberate effect of discrepancy between the old and the new. Contrast, Kosovel felt, was a prerequisite for perception and meaning in the sense that nothing can be seen or understood in isolation, independent from something else of different quality: "I paint black alongside white, since this provokes contrast and since this contrast signifies something, I paint brown, because I can differentiate it from green" (Journal, CW 3: 705).

This heterogeneous body of Kons poems brought under a joint title demonstrates that Kosovel did not feel himself to be constrained by any single school of thought, or discipline, be it Constructivist, Futurist or Zenitist, but sought a synthesis that was – and had to be – entirely his own. By the same token, he opened up his literary creativity to directions derived from music and the visual arts – the contrast "doctrine" and the above quote almost certainly owe something to the then revolutionary teachings of the Bauhaus[46] – aspiring for a poet to unite, as noted by

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avant-garde verse, is the time in which Tagore's name appears with the greatest frequency in the surviving letters.

[46] The famous Bauhaus preliminary course (*Vorkurs*), set up by the painter (and great colorist) Johannes Itten (1888-1967) under the directorship of Walter Gropius and subsequently enriched by the theoretical teachings of the Swiss artist Paul Klee (1879-1940) and the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) revolutionized elementary visual language based on colour and form.

Tokarz, "the sensibilities of a painter and musician, poet and philosopher" (2005: 94).

The kind of self-conscious formalism, economy of expression, and slide into abstraction allied at one and the same with a timeless lyricism, that defines Kosovel's avant-garde verse comes, perhaps – if one risks a cross-generic comparison – closer to the modernist spirit of some of Tagore's paintings than indeed his poetry. Although it would be wrong to think of Tagore's paintings as entirely separate from, or doing something entirely new to his novels, plays or poetry, which also perpetually cross the boundaries of convention, the ostensibly "darker" side that critics have noted with respect to Tagore's visual art, where grotesque imagery, irony and free play stand to repudiate the "conventional" language of beauty (Mitter 2007: 76-7), is a novelty in Tagore's artistic expression, and can be conceptually linked to the "anti-poetic" thrust of Kosovel's avant-garde verse.

For example, the function of the face as a mask that crops up repeatedly, almost obsessively, in Tagore's paintings can be conceptually linked to Kosovel's avant-gardism. On the one hand, the image of the face as mask is Tagore's personal expression of the phenomenon of global primitivism, that critical form of modernity, as argued by Mitter, that forged its language through exposure to Native American, Oceanic and African ritual masks to articulate its dissent from materialist culture (*Ibid.*: 12; 71)[47], but on the other, it is also a trope for the veil obscuring a more authentic existence and the artist's role to penetrate this outer reality. In both senses, but more precisely in the latter, the objective is shared by Kosovel-the-avant-gardist, foreshadowed in his line "My poem is my face".

It was as a painter that Tagore, who took up the genre in his late sixties, came to be seen as one of India's foremost modernists and avant-gardists (*Ibid.*: 66). Not only did he break with representational realism but he also departed from the nationalist goals of the Bengal Revival School of art, to which belonged his nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore: (Robinson 1989: 51). Indeed, when his paintings are concerned, critics in India, Europe and America struggle to locate the artist. Is he more of Europe or of India? The striking formal affinities between his works and the works of various European modernists, such as Klee, Picasso, Munch,

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Students were often asked to make collages from contrasting materials, textures, forms and colours with the aim of deriving the artwork's meaning from its underlying structure (cf. Whitford: 1984).

[47] In Tagore's case, primitivism, as Mitter suggests, chiefly fulfils the function of an anti-colonial tool and was an important content also of his educational ideology and projects at Santiniketan, cf. 78-9.

Nolde and others have led some critics to profoundly question their "Indianness". Tagore's lack of formal training and his almost self-conscious endorsement of an amateur style may have contributed to this questioning, notwithstanding the fact that they are utterly original, and had, as noted by Robinson, no precedence in any category of Indian art known in 1930 or even, as he claims, to date (*Ibid.*: 50). To reject something on the basis that it is without precedence within the existing tradition is, of course, to take a very orthodox view of tradition. It is especially ironic in the light of an artist whose works are so intimately bound up with his personal and local experiences of people and landscape in Bengal (Kumar 1999: 17) and whose bulk of artistic work emerged after he was done with travelling in the West and had, as it were, permanently settled in Santiniketan (Robinson 1989: 52).

Tagore defined the purpose of art as self-expression: as the expression of personality (cf. 2005a: 10-28). Kumar's explanation of Tagore's concept of personality as "knowing the world as a 'personal fact'" or, more elaborately, as "the intimate and mutually transforming encounter between individual man and the world", helps us locate the pronounced internationalist dimension of his art in the bringing together of "cross-cultural contact" with "experiential rootedness" (Kumar 1999: 17). It is true that through his many European tours in the 1920s Tagore came to experience more of Western art first hand than any of his contemporaries, but it is also true that he deliberately sought out contemporary trends in Europe in line with his internationalist convictions poised to counteract nationalism. "There is nothing so good for an awakening of consciousness as a good jolt from the outside", as Tagore wrote to his two artist nephews from Japan in 1916, trying to get them to travel and experience more of the world (cited in Robinson 1989: 51).

When in 1922, a number of years before Tagore himself took up painting, he was touring Germany, he visited the school of design and architecture in Weimar, the Bauhaus (cf. Mitter 2007: 16-17). The encounter proved momentous for the meeting of like minds and a cultural consolidation between East and West. Immediately Tagore could sense the similarities of pedagogical intentions between his own Santiniketan experiment with its ideal of "integrated life" and the Bauhaus' attempt to establish an ideal community in miniature where the creative potential of each and every student would be liberated and students not just acquired technical skills but developed their personalities as well (cf. *Ibid.*: 26; 78-81; on Bauhaus cf. Whitford: 46). The desire to reform society through art education lay at the root of both these projects and it is not difficult to see how the mystically-minded Itten, an

enthusiast for Eastern philosophy, must have delighted in Tagore's visit. Tagore, in turn, must have also taken to Itten as presumably also to Kandinsky's spiritual conception of art. Though the monk's habit of Itten and the mystical bent of the institution were eventually displaced by the worker's overalls of the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and his predilection for the machine, Tagore did not miss this opportunity to bring the achievements of the Bauhaus closer to his compatriots. Through his request, some 250 Bauhaus exhibits, including the works of Klee and Kandinsky, were shown in Calcutta in 1922, at the 14th annual exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art. According to Mitter, the impact of the exhibition "sounded the death knell not only for academic art in India but also for orientalism, and its engagements with the past" (*Ibid.*: 17-18).

The artistic innovations of the Bauhaus can be said to have come to Slovenia also via the intervention of one individual; that of the Trieste-born Slovene artist and painter Avgust Černigoj (1898-1985), who also felt, perhaps more radically and certainly with more justification than Tagore, that its metropolis of Ljubljana needed a good jolt from the outside.[48] Born as one of many children in a dockworker's family in the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Černigoj is said to have developed an interest in colour and painting from an early age. His formal art education began at the Secondary School of Arts and Crafts in Trieste, and following a short stint as an art teacher in Postojna and Bologna after service in the war, he decided to continue his education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. For a time, Munich seemed to have satisfied Černigoj's thirst for learning about the latest trends, as it also brought him into a circle of artists who, according to Krečič, were "intensely debating the question of modernism, especially the problem of how to settle accounts with the old artistic directions and bring a new art into force" (1989: 41). One day he chanced upon an exhibition of Kandinsky in a bookshop and learnt from one of the books on display that the Russian painter was teaching at the Bauhaus. Having been expelled from the Academy for wanting to do collages that were considered by his professors to be "non-art", he left for the Bauhaus set on exploring wider artistic interests (they included sculpture, architecture, even ballet) and craving theoretical knowledge (cf. Černigoj, memoir, in Krečič 1982: 215-18). The theory he received from the Russian artist himself, but the *Formlehre* came from

[48] According to the art historian Peter Krečič, the author of the only academic study to date on Černigoj (cf. 1999), the artist visited Ljubljana primarily with the intention of "bringing about an artistic revolution in what he felt was a socially and culturally backward environment" (2004: 25).

László Moholy-Nagy, whose constructivist direction lent an entirely new dimension to his work, particularly his collages and sculptures. If previously he was concerned with the task of "creating new forms according to new techniques" now it was "a question of realizing these on a higher plane of awareness as regards the basic elements and structures of an abstract composition that is defined through the dimensions of time and space" (Krečič 1989: 43). With vital input also from other notable professors (Walter Gropius, Oscar Schlemmer and Klee) as well as with an indirect exposure to Russian Constructivism through journals and intermediaries (Tatlin, Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Malevich and others), alongside good insight into the theatre scene (Tairov, Mayerhold, Eisenstein), Černigoj came away from his short stay at the Bauhus amply equipped to fashion his own brand of Constructivism. He did this in two stages, first in Ljubljana (1924-5) and then in Trieste (1925-1929).

For all his good intentions to broaden the understanding of art in the Slovenian metropolis, Ljubljana turned out to be a huge disappointment. His first constructivist exhibition of 1924, which spanned items as diverse as three-dimensional reliefs, architectural models, sculptures, parts of a machine, a motorcycle, an American worker's overalls accompanied by slogans of the type "Artist must become an engineer, an engineer artist", or "Capital is theft" – all intended to subvert the bourgeois hedonistic conception of art and good taste – met largely with derision and lack of understanding. When, in 1925, he decided to drop the provocative approach for a more academic one, and staged another exhibition in which Constructivism was contextualized historically as a logical break with Impressionism and Expressionism, he met again with rejection from his critics, beginning to realize he was fighting a losing battle. The nineteenth-century conceptions of art were so entrenched and closely guarded that any deviation from the norm was automatically deemed suspect, in Černigoj's case to the point of being considered a dangerous veneer for communism and revolution. On the pretext of possessing a communist paper, Černigoj was reported to the police and obliged to leave Ljubljana within twenty-four hours. He moved back to Trieste, gathered a movement and realized his ambition of a constructivist environment based on his experience at the Bauhaus.[49]

It was in Munich that Černigoj met Karmela Kosovel, Srečko's sister, who was then studying music at the *Akademie der Tonkust* under the proferssorship of the pianist, composer and teacher Joseph Pembauer (Rojc 2008: 292), a celebrated artist

[49] I have drawn entirely on Krečič. For more on Černigoj's activities in the two cities, cf. 1989: 44-84.

whose portrait was drawn by Gustav Klimt in 1890. The friendship and romance that developed between Černigoj and Karmela soon drew Srečko into the circle, in which ideas linking visual arts, poetry and music were fruitfully exchanged.[50] Later the two artists met in person in Ljubljana and Černigoj spent a month in Tomaj during the summer of 1924. The one letter that has survived of the correspondence between them gives some idea of the intensity and contents of their exchange. It is a letter Kosovel wrote in January 1924, not long before Černigoj took the decision to leave Munich. These snatches of writing already anticipate the collage technique that was to vitalize both the artist's modernist experimentations while they also sound the new parameters of art in which aesthetic novelty and formal innovation were to be married to a spiritualist understanding of art:

> Every emotion, every sensation is a fragment of the whole of life [...] Every poem emerges out of an entire chaos of parallelisms, images, thoughts; in the same way every painting should consist of lines and tones, which may all converge in one idea, but where each of them, in its own right, constitutes one plastic object that imbues this painting with life [...] Of course, this first requires mastering the elements of expression with which you then construct a painting.
>
> Today all art is in a process of movement, dynamism, music. It's only goal is to endure, to show what is eternal in man, to show the soul at her ease, it must show a world in which man is yet to become completely free [...] so each of his gestures is an echo of spirituality.
>
> [...]
>
> To create is to show up spirituality in matter [...] to spiritualize matter (CW 3: 534-5).

Tagore too held a spiritualized conception of creativity, and it comes as no surprise to see that Černigoj, Karmela and Kosovel were all drawn to Tagore's ideas. In one of the letters Karmela sent to her brother in March 1923 from Munich, published for the first time only last year, she states how together with Černigoj and another Slovenian painter, they are "studying" Tagore's *Sadhana*: "When I get to the end of the part I am reading, I'll tell you what I think. We would love to have you here with us. I keep talking about you, all of you, so everyone wants to meet you" (Kosovel 2008a: 105). In a letter to her sister Anica, written in the same month, the commitment of this knowledge-thirsty post-war generation becomes even clearer:

[50] Kosovel wanted to organize "a week of 'young people'" in Gorica/Gorizia, where Černigoj would display his paintings, Karmela would play music and he himself would lecture on "building New Europe" (Letter to Karmela, 13/06/1923, CW 3: 498). Cf. also poem "Arch of Triumph" (Appendix B: 277).

> We work a lot, study, keep accounts on a daily basis, and feel satisfied when we are exhausted from work. It is very sweet to rest on the back of knowing that the day has not been unproductive. We encourage each other to work, 'chatting' in the evening in the student's canteen where we have dinner, tea, after which we read: Cankar, Župančič, and we have now started on Tagore [...] (*Ibid.*: 292).

Certainly, Tagore's philosophy found fertile ground in the open and seeking minds of these young artists. It would be interesting to pursue the connection also with regards to Černigoj (a connection that has had no mention so far) and his development as a constructivist artist. Given the fact that Kosovel and, as can be speculated from the above, Černigoj, who were to become the foremost avant-garde artists in their respective fields and generation,[51] felt so strong an affinity with Tagore's ideas, and that Tagore himself was drawn to the Bauhaus and vice versa, one can at the very least be confident that, on some level in terms of resistance to institutionalized art, capitalism and the ideology of reason, for example, but also in terms of the search for spiritual truth, there was a notable convergence between Tagore's outlook and the European avant-gardes.[52]

The subject would no doubt require a broader study than anything I could have anticipated on these pages. Nonetheless, Tagore's palpable "influence" on Kosovel that has emerged from this study is intended as a contribution towards Mitter's project of decentering modernism (cf. 2008), urging us think outside the monolithic perceptions, which not only fail to understand the enriching role of "the peripheries" but also inadequately acknowledge the "cosmopolitan" character of the avant-garde (Mitter 2007: 13). For indeed, it was against the early twentieth-century trans-national discourse of global modernity that Kosovel and Tagore were united in outlook across their vastly different cultural and geopolitical spaces. This

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[51] Černigoj's recognition as an avant-garde painter came even later than Kosovel's. In 1978, after much painstaking research to try and trace and reconstruct lost artefacts, a restrospective exhibition of the Constructivist era with Černigoj at its centre was staged in Idrija (Slovenia).

[52] By the time Černigoj came to the Weimar Bauhaus and became a pupil of Moholy-Nagy, the atmosphere had changed radically from the days of Itten. "All the metaphysics, meditation, breathing exercises, intuition, emotional apprehension of forms and colours, were blown out of the window" and supplanted by the form-follows-function doctrine (Whitford 1984: 128). Černigoj steered between the ideological rift between Moholy, whose attitude to the machine bordered on fetishization, and the "transcendentalist" Kandinsky, who "wanted nothing to do with it". Although he veered towards Moholy, who "topped", as he put it, "all his other experiences", he nonetheless held that "The combining of materials into constructions, into things never seen before [...] What we were doing was not meant to serve anything, except the spirit"(Černigoj, in Krečič 1982: 217).

convergence was underpinned by Kosovel's sympathetic identification with the Indian poet.

Of course there is no straightforward connection between the European avant-gardes and the Indian poet, for not all modernist or avant-gard artists were sympathetically inclined towards Tagore. Yeats and Pound lost their interest precisely because Tagore was not seen to be modernist enough; and closer to Kosovel's own cultural mileu, the Belgrade avant-garde circle spearheaded by the controversial figure of Ljubomir Micić and founder of Zenitism forcefully objected to the Indian poet, when he came to Yugoslavia in November 1926, on the grounds that he was a fake portender of a new civilization. Let us briefly describe the incident, even if Kosovel, who died only months before Tagore's trips to Zagreb and Belgrade, was no longer part of this Tagoreana.

The group around Micić made their sentiments known on the first of Tagore's lectures at University of Belgrade on November 15. No sooner Tagore appeared on the stage to the jubilation of a packed hall (tickets were sold out and many were thronging the steps leading up to the entrance to catch a glimpse of the Indian poet), his presence was denigrated by shouts of "Down with Tagore! Long Live Gandhi!" and pamphlets were thrown up in the air with a printed open letter to the Bengali poet in the Serbian original and English translation, signed by the brothers Micić and Branko ve Poljanski. (cf. Pejčić: 67).

Addressed to the "Gentle father of Bengal and false prophet", this letter protested against Tagore's alleged pro-Western and bourgeois stance in India's independence struggle, as opposed to the grass-roots Gandhian approach – the dichotomous view may owe something to Rolland's book *Mahatma Gandhi*[53] – in a vitriolic mixture of direct attack ("Your verses are lemonade, your philosophy dung, your mysticism, like all mysticism is, – mystification"); conceited bravado ("We speak truth and only in the name of truth declare ourselves publicly against you today"); self-pity ("the best sons of this country of the Balkans are strangers in their own land"); and exhortation ("bow down to your great contemporary Mahatma Gandhi") (Micić 1926: 19-20).[54] Condemned in the daily press as a "scandal", the

[53] The book was mentioned in the journal *Zenit*. Cf. Rolland 2002: 100-127.

[54] It is ironic that Tagore should be seen as Gandhi's opponent, when in an interview published on his visit in *Vreme*, when asked what lessons can we take from contemporary India, he replied: "India today sends forth a new light to the world, and that is Gandhi" (cf. Vinaver 1926). The letter is available online at http://digital.nb.rs/scr/browse.php?collection=no-zenit.

eruption was, reports say, swiftly brought under control and Tagore, visibly disturbed, was able to begin his lecture (Pejčić 1988: 67).[55]

That Tagore was seen as a fake trader of "empty phrases" in the eyes of this self-proclaimed "barbarians" whose allusions to "the race vigour of the Balkans" could barely mask inverted racism – or what Petrović identifies as "[a]n undercurrent of frustrated nationalism wishing to reaffirm itself in a somewhat modified form" – had something to do with the wider circumstances of Tagore's tour. The Mussolini affair was still fresh in people's minds and was reported on again in the media on the eve of Tagore's arrival;[56] Tagore's coming from Horty's Hungary and his subsequent trip to King Boris' Bulgaria also made his political leanings suspect. Then there was the commerciality of his visit and, finally, his foreign addresses were not always above "a train of commonplaces that could have been subscribed to by anybody even in those early times of double talk and double think" (Petrović 1970: 15).

Coming back to Kosovel, Černigoj and Tagore, however, and their achievements with respect to their personal modernisms, we can conclude that all of them significantly widened the cultural borders of their respective countries, as they adapted a variety of cultural and intellectual movements without necessarily negating local and regional traits. They all faced resistance from their national communities, which, to a lesser or greater extent, for a period of shorter or longer duration and for various reasons, perceived unacceptable discontinuities between their "individual offerings", to borrow the term from Williams (1961: 49), and the received traditions. Černigoj was cut off completely and ushered into political exile; Kosovel, no doubt learning from Černigoj's example as well as from the case of Podbevšek, the avant-garde poet of the older generation,[57] kept his "Kons" poems in the drawer, away from prying eyes, where they were effectively to remain for the next four decades; and Tagore, who in his paintings had least pretensions to be, as Robinson notes, "recognisably 'Indian'" could foresee the antipathy towards his new medium in India before he put them on display in 1931, a year later than in Europe (Robinson 1989: 53). These innovators were well aware that they were pushing at

[55] The one letter existing in the Tagore archives at *Rabindra Bhavan* in Santiniketan that was sent from Belgrade makes no mention of the incident and I was unable to find any specific evidence of how Tagore felt in Belgrade.

[56] See Ilijić 1926.

[57] Anton Podbevšek (1898-1981) was Kosovel's forerunner, the central and most radical figure of the first wave of the historical avant-garde in Slovenia, whose collection "*Človek z bombami*" (*Man with Bombs*, 1925) met with such devastating critique that Podbevešek was effectively silenced. For more on the poet, cf. Šalamun-Biedrzycka 1972.

the limits of acceptable expression, but they also knew that without addressing – and transgressing – a system of formal rules there cannot be any creative act of self-perfection. Without destruction, there can be no construction.

Temperamentally, of course, they were all artists of a different order. It is hard to imagine that Tagore's "theory of modernity", which he posited to be "a theory of the impersonal" in the sense of "a simple acceptance of the real with a quiet, dispassionate heart" could have very much in common with Černigoj's overtly confrontational, even agitational, stance (2001f: 282). Kosovel, perhaps, was in this sense closer to Tagore. For all his endorsement of Constructivism as he came to know it, or his overall sympathies towards Zenitism (though I am sure he would have condemned Micić's response to Tagore), he nevertheless refused to identify with any of the programmes of the post-Russian-revolution upheaval. He continuously warned against the coercive nature of ideologies *per se* and their potential to enslave people's minds: he wanted "sound reasoning" from people, not "blind faith" (Letter to Grahor, 15/08/1925, in Kosovel 2006: 227). At the same time, and this is reflected in Kosovel's creative work, he shared Tagore's "fear of abstraction, that destructive force, which has no relation to human truth, and therefore can be easily brutal and mechanical" (2001: 432). Without denying the importance of technology for everyday living, and with real respect for science, Kosovel, like Tagore, could not accept, to borrow once again from Mitter, "the teleological certainty of modernity" (2007: 12).[58] Both poets' attitudes towards urban civilization were ambivalent, to say the least. This rather quirky note Kosovel jotted on the pages of his journal under the heading of "Goals of Culture", sums up rather well Tagore's place in Kosovel's artistic universe:

> Tagore is the one who has shown a way out of the cities of Europe across the grey rooftops [a recurring metaphor Kosovel deploys to denote a civilization in decline], a way for the soul to eternity (CW 3: 657)

With respect to Kosovel's avant-gardism, critics have unanimously noted his peculiar synthesis of avant-garde formalism with (romantic) emotionalism, rooted in ethical humanism.[59] What I have tried to argue throughout this chapter is the pivotal role

[58] For Kosovel's views on the importance of technology and the contrast between technology and nature, cf. CW 3: 706. For further analysis, cf. Vrečko 2005: 177-8.

[59] For example, Poniž writes: "Futurism and Dadaism taught the coldest, most sober and insensitive view of the poetic process, glorifying and focusing on the very means, process, and method of

Tagore played with respect to this tension that has kept many of Kosovel's poems alive to the present day. It is indeed intriguing to think that in the following lines there may in fact be something of Tagore:

Dung is gold
and gold is dung.
Both = 0.
O= α
α = 0
A B<
1, 2, 3.
Whoever has no soul
doesn't need gold.
Whoever has a soul
doesn't need dung.
EE—AW.*

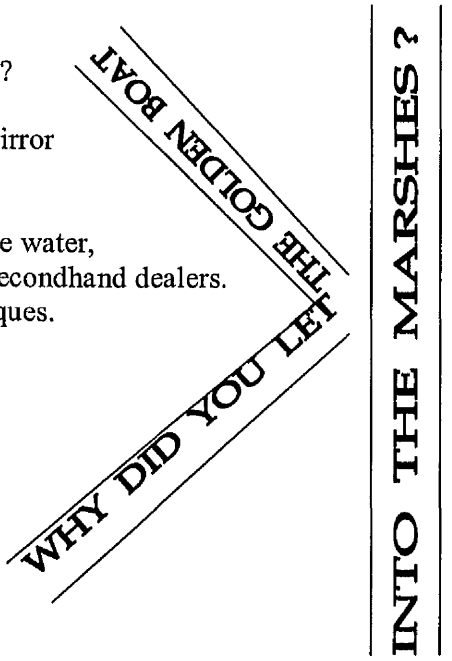
("Kons. 5", Kosovel 2008: 76)

*The sound for ass's braying.

If "Kons. 5" embodies the connection between Kosovel and Tagore only tenuously, the following poem draws it out explicitly, as it builds the allusion to Tagore into the very logic of the avant-garde text – formally and thematically – in what can only by understood as a symptomatic place.

The Spherical Mirror

Is it the mirror's fault
you've got a hooked nose?
Glory be to Heine!
Look into the spherical mirror
to recognize yourself.
Nationalism is a lie.
Chestnuts rustle beside the water,
autumn has come to the secondhand dealers.
The shops are full of antiques.
Cin, cin.
Give up on yourself.
A red chrysanthemum.*
An autumn tomb …
a white tomb.
Ivan Cankar.



assembly. Instead, constructivism as Srečko Kosovel developed it was put on a different, human ethical basis" (cited in: Djurić 2003: 79). Pizzi: "I remain persuaded that the more profoundly Modernist and most valuable significance of Kosovel's Constructivism lies in his humanist, pacifist and ethically Socialist conviction: a social revolution must remain constructive rather than destructive" (2005: 245-6).

* One of Ivan Cankar's works is entitled *Bela krizantema* (*The White Chrysanthemum*), where the flower is deployed as a symbolic representation of modern art. Red Chrysanthemums on the other hand are flowers associated with the grave in Slovenia, for they are most commonly brought to graveyards at All Saints' Day (1 November).

This text is another of Kosovel's poems that enacts an uneasy transition between the old world and the new one. The old is captured in allusions to autumn and shops overflowing with antiquities; it is ironized in references to the German romantic poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) and more so in the romantic image of rustling chestnuts. But in the irony, as always with Kosovel, there is a note of lament, of not quite being able to let go (cf. his preface to the *Golden Boat*). Irony itself is subverted and the old is anticipated to reincarnate itself in a new form. The red chrysanthemum must become white (the transition signalled by three dots), as must romanticism come to terms with modernity. The reference to Ivan Cankar (1876-1918), himself a borderline figure in this transition, is apt indeed, as is the poet's embedded reference to Tagore in the pictorial image of the spherical or concaved mirror. Significantly the mirror is also letter 'K' reversed – another marker of self-identification, it seems, with the Indian poet and his vision of liberation. But if "K" is a reference to Kosovel himself, it is also an expression of his faith in the validity of individual conscience: "Look into the spherical mirror to recognize [lit. "know"] yourself". And as Kosovel struggled to reinvent himself artistically, he created his "K"ons poems. To have the allusion to Tagore lodged in the very symbol of the transition from the "traditional" to the avant-garde is to indicate, in no uncertain terms, that the Indian poet and what he stood for was at the fulcrum of Kosovel's poetic evolution.

The line, "Nationalism is a lie", rings true with all the conviction of Tagore's statement, "nationalism is a menace", and needs no further comment. But "letting the Golden Boat into the marshes" is a more ambivalent statement. At the most concrete or prosaic level, the image could simply be a reference to Kosovel's first collection of poems *Zlati čoln*, and his coming to regret the decision to publish it, as it became apparent the publisher lacked funding. His elder brother's patronizing response to the manuscript (Stano was a published poet and a recognizable figure in the literary establishment) would also only have aggravated Kosovel's already strong sense that Slovenian literary and ideological scene were profoundly stifling (i.e. marshy, swampy). So, the question could be a statement of self-reprobation: "Why did you let *your* Golden Boat into the marshes?"

But if considered against the wider context of Kosovel's preoccupations, the image becomes a potent symbol of the project of liberation that Kosovel shared with Tagore, and strove to realize through his emancipated and yet ideal-bound avant-garde poetics:

> Only the artist who has stepped out of the *marshes* of contemporary society and entered a new society, which he felt within himself, only such an artist is the new priest of truth, justice, humanity and goodness (emphasis mine, CW 3: 650).

The desperate summoning forth of "a new mode of human being" (Brooks 2008: 9) that Kosovel envisaged went hand in hand not only with the figure of a new artist but with an evocation of a new age. What the parameters of the new age were, he encapsulated in the following lines: "An age without constant models is a progressive, dynamic age; it moves in the name of a spirited, unacknowledged creative ideal" (Journal, CW 3: 763). Is not this, in the final analysis, the meaning of the Golden Boat for both Kosovel and Tagore?

Cultural "politics"

As early as in 1923, Kosovel wrote to Karmela in Munich: "I intend to go to Paris. Don't laugh at my daring modesty. I set my goals far so that I will go far" (14/05/1923, CW 3: 494). It is impossible to know whether Kosovel would have made it to the city of Dada and Surrealism after he completed his studies, as he had hoped. As things turned out, he did not even make it to Munich. Confined to Ljubljana for most of his short adult life, he was prone to dream of escape but also, at the same time, to contemplate his dreams in relation to his adopted city. In the same letter:

> I dream so expansively that nothing can come in the way, not even Ljubljana with its philistine walls. I love her like a child loves its crib; I love her because she is but the only centre of our, Slovenian, spirituality (*Ibid.*: 491).

In fact, Kosovel became feverishly active in trying to set up an alternative cultural space, one in which "Slovenian spirituality" would not be at odds with global trends,

and "narrow domestic walls", as Tagore would say, opened up to the world. His clarion call was high-sounding indeed:

> We need to raise our country to the heights of the countries of the world, to the breadth of human rights, to the depths of ethical problems. That for us is the cultural mission of Slovenianness (CW 3: 60).

Driven by this mission, Kosovel came to participate fully in the cultural life of the metropolis. Even while in school he became involved in various extra-curricular activities that led to the founding of his own journal "Lepa Vida" ("The Fair Vida"),[60] and as a student of Romance and Slavic languages and literatures at the newly-established University of Ljubljana (auditing also lectures in philosophy, pedagogy and history of art), he became active as a writer, editor, founder of journals and "clubs", as well as a public speaker. As with Tagore, there was a strong public side to Kosovel's personality, and he pursued the needs of both his private and public selves with equal determination. He friend Ivo Grahor also wrote of him in charismatic terms:

> Srečko's typical traits were great loyalty in friendship and seriousness. I always had a feeling that he was mulling over something and that whatever his goal was he would pursue it from all possible sides. Being around him, I finally realized that the reason why Srečko liked to disregard all differences between people was because he wanted to reach the human core in every person; the core was what mattered to him, the rest was disposable. That is how he made friends. His power over people, if that is the right word, was true and natural. He would never take more than was his due, not even later at the university when he effectively became the leader of an artistic circle (1931: 320-1).

Kosovel, like Tagore, sought to extend his vision as a poet into the practical sphere of life through work and education. He argued that people needed poetry as much as they needed bread – that everyone is entitled to an education so that they know their inalienable human rights, and that culture is as powerful a vehicle for personal and

[60] Kosovel's older school friend (1903-1920) Branko Jeglič, whose unexpected death a year later was a severe blow to the poet, was a formative influence in this respect. Before Kosovel started his own journal in 1922, he had already worked with *Jadran* (*Adriatic*), *Preporod* (*Revival*) and *Mlado Jutro* (*Young Morning*). The name of the journal *Lepa Vida* alludes to the popular folk story, in which a young, beautiful woman, Vida, desiring a new life, leaves her husband and child and sets out for the wider world, only to find herself regretting her decision, lured as she was by false promises of happiness. Originally a folk ballad, the motif of beautiful Vida became a potent symbol of unfulfilled yearning, treated by every subsequent generation of writers and linked to frustrated national aspirations, most famously by France Prešeren and Ivan Cankar. Kosovel brought out six issues of the journal, before financial difficulties suspended its publication.

social transformation as are politics and economy (CW 3: 26). His activities in Ljubljana were clearly part of his wish to facilitate such cultural growth. After the failed attempt to set up a forum called *Klub mladih* ("Club of the Young"), the aim of which was to unite the younger generation across the divides of class, religion and political conviction, he did manage in the autumn of 1925, with the help of his friend Ciril Debevec, who had just returned from the theatre studies in Prague, to launch the so-called "Ivan Cankar Literary-dramatic circle." For a short time the activities of this group became a recognizable force in the cultural life of Ljubljana. Here Kosovel's aspirations as regards cosmopolitan education were finally given a platform upon which he could exercize his idea(l)s. His leadership qualities, too, came to the fore, as he relentlessly urged his circle to work and commit themselves to bringing about a "new cultural movement" (cf. letters to Debevec, CW 3: 570-5). It was at this time that some of his essayistic writings addressing issues of art, politics, nationalism and education were being published in *Mladina* (*Youth*), a journal he took over, as an editor, from the Farmer's party and was able to mould to his own convictions.[61]

An ambitious ten-year programme of lectures, discussions, readings and artistic performances shows him designating tasks to himself and his circle of colleagues across a wide range of fields and interests. The idea was that everyone would work together for a common goal, but without impinging on each other's individuality. An important segment of the programme is therefore accorded to self-education. This required members to research trends in contemporary art and literature in Slovenia and abroad, evaluating them in the light of contemporary philosophical, social and political thought, as well as from the perspective of the contribution of "great personalities", both past and present. Tagore, needless to say, was one such "great personality".[62]

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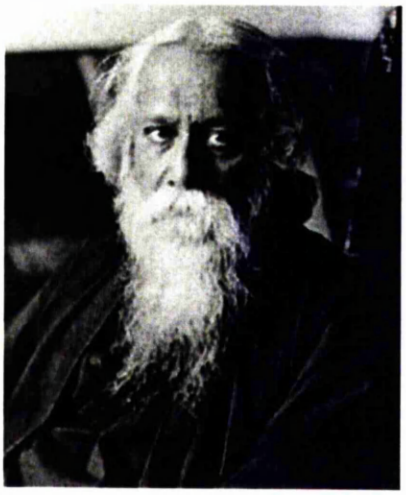
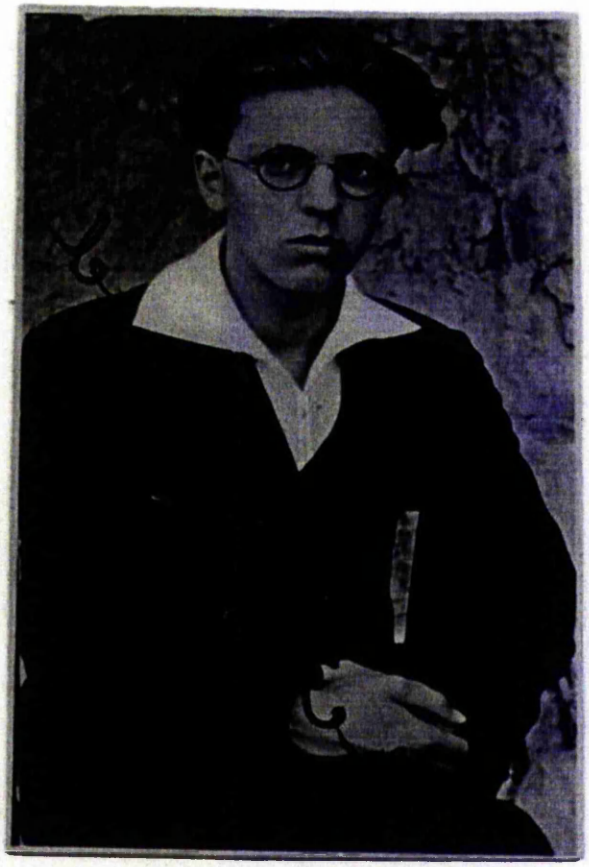
[61] "*Umetnost in proletarec" [Art and the Proletariat], "Razpad družbe in propad umetnosti*" [The Desintegration of Society and Demise of Art], "*Kaj je kulturno gibanje?*" [What is a Cultural Movement?], "*Manifesto svobodnim duhom*" [A Manifesto for Free Spirits; based on Rolland's Declaration], "*Kriza človečanstva*" [Crisis in Humanity] came out in separate issues of Mladina between 1925 and 1926.

[62] Ciril Debevec was assigned to lecture on "Drama in the light of Slovenian identity from the perspective of contemporary, modern conceptualisation of nationhood (Tagore)". Kosovel himself, as already mentioned, was to present a paper entitled "Tagore and Gandhi: two solutions to the question of nationhood." Tagore is noted on the programme once more, alongside a lecture on Heine and young Germany, as well as Serbian Modern Art (CW 3: 746-9).

As mentioned already, both Kosovel and Tagore identified education of everyone as the way forward. Culture, Kosovel specifically insisted, should not be class-bound, but there for all people to benefit from (CW 3: 22). Following this persuasion, the club not only organized a series of public lectures with readings in Ljubljana, but took their message to the miners and workers of Zagorje. He envisaged such public events to be a part of a larger ongoing programme across Slovenia, connecting town and country. The authorities, however, suspicious of the poet's political leanings, intervened and cancelled his second reading in Ljubljana. In any case, the poem "Ecstasy of Death, which he read at Zagorje in Febraury was a chilling foreshadowing of his own untimely death. The reading had animated a heated debate that led Kosovel to miss the last train home. He was forced to spend the night on a freezing platform, and caught a severe cold. In the wake of further complications, Srečko Kosovel died on 27 May 1926, not even twenty-three years of age.

PART IV





CONCLUSION: TOWARDS THE SYMBOL OF A MISSING FULLNESS

One of the highlights in researching the connection between Srečko Kosovel and Rabindranath Tagore, apart from the often unexpected dimensions that would emerge, undoubtedly came in 2008 with the already mentioned English publications of two newly translated and selected poetry collections of Kosovel and Tagore respectively, and both entitled *The Golden Boat*. This was a timely suggestion that "Zlati čoln" and "Sonar tari" were not only central as symbols to both poets' versatile creativity, but that there was also a correlation between them. Together and separately, Kosovel and Tagore were brought out as relevant poetic voices of our time.

What is it that connected them in their day and why might they still be relevant? Kosovel's response to Tagore, as demonstrated, was grounded in a strong sense of identification with the Indian poet. Tagore was no doubt an inspirational model to the young poet who saw his native region affected by Western European imperialist forces, similar to those that subjugated India. Though arising primarily out of the specific circumstances of the Slovenian Littoral after the Great War, his identification also rode the impulse unleashed by the Russian Revolution, where sympathies for the exploited worker were logically extended to the colonized in Asia and Africa. In one aspect of his identification, therefore, the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles converged, so the "East" became as much the promise of a new world order associated with the Revolution as it was evocative of the old romantic "Orient" that would help heal the deep spiritual "crisis" of the post-War European generation.

But if this frames Kosovel's response in the wider historical sense, relevant and important as that is, it does not explain some of the important nuances or departures from such a generalized picture. Tagore may have been co-opted as a champion of the "proletariat" in Kosovel's world view, but Kosovel himself was no blind admirer of the Soviet experiment, suspicious as he was of any political or ideological system dominating man. For him the "proletariat" was more or less interchangeable with the "downtrodden" or "humiliated man", suggesting therefore a more universal human condition. And for all Kosovel's othering of the Indian poet along the predictable romantic and orientalist lines, there was little of blind veneration in his affection for Tagore.

So what, more specifically, did Kosovel find in Tagore? For me, the most touching aspect of his response, and revealed largely through his letters and journal notes, lay in that the young man, up against real life's privations, found a sustained source of life-affirming outlook in Tagore's poetry and philosophy, quite contrary to the associations commonly held with the Indian poet. And by far the most interesting, and potentially significant for de-centering Eurocentric perceptions of modernism, emerged through the link that I established between Kosovel's personal avant-gardism and Tagore's philosophy, a link alluded to in the very avant-garde body of poetry through various intertextual references that clearly point to Tagore, in recognition, as it were, of his intellectual and aesthetic impact. Kosovel's personal quest for what he called "contemporary unadorned art" that would reveal "the elementary face of man" – the "naked man" – stripped of lies and hypocrisy owes something to the Tagorean notion (acted on by a number of other modern European poets) of having to get behind manifest phenomena, to some essential quality, or larger – soul – purpose, even as Tagore, and Kosovel with him, demanded full participation in the everyday world as the path to human self-perfection. Once Tagore's place is so ascertained within Kosovel's artistic and intellectual horizon, deeper unities and correlations between the two writers begin to emerge. This formed the second level of my enquiry, and I will sum up the few main parallels that have emerged in the course of the study.

Both Kosovel and Tagore wrote from a distinct position of geographic and cultural "in-betweeness". The very inception of the Bengali middle class arose from extended contact with the British, and Tagore's family stood at the fulcrum of the many ways in which Western influences were being filtered into Indian society. The various liminalities of Kosovel's personal geography have a backdrop in the geo-political realities of the post-war era, with the break-up of a multi-national Empire and the emergence of a new South-Slavic state. A move to Ljubljana from his native region, the Italianization of Trieste and Primorska, the dispersal of his family members between three nation states all importantly contributed to his short personal history of dislocations that gave Kosovel what is today more fashionably referred to as "the double vision" – a perspective of both an insider and an outsider. Always and already exposed to diverse cultural models and trends, both poets found narrow reification of identities along national lines unacceptable. While enriching the traditions they inherited, they

were not limited by them. And both were exposed to the ideological constructs of "East" and "West" within their respective geographies, and tried to heal these divides through appeals to a common human ground, whether between Muslims and Hindus, Indians and the British or Italians and Slovenes.

Even as Tagore would sometimes construct his arguments in large and problematic terms of "East" and "West", and Kosovel endorse a dualistic view of the world between the suppressors and the suppressed, or "us" and "them", neither permitted themselves the luxury of thinking that the solution to the "world problem" lay in a simple reversal of these dichotomies and the power structures they entailed. Kosovel's poem "Ecstasy of Death" reveals a mind painfully aware that the fault lines between *self* and *other* run deep in the strata of every culture, society and ultimately the individual, shifting the emphasis from class struggle to the humanist ideal of self-cultivation and self-overcoming. Tagore likewise, as Ashis Nandy trenchantly put it, telescoped the "self-other" logic of the colonial encounter into an opportunity for a "self-self" encounter, replacing the "clash-of-civilizations" concept by evocations of harmony created through every society's growing in critical introspection. In line with his notion of the individual enmeshed in multiple relationships and his understanding of freedom as interdependence, this for him meant forging cooperative ties with other societies and working towards a non-violent solution.

The hybridity of their backgrounds was thus the pool from which they tapped their ideologies of resistance and envisioned a new world. This signals an important shift in perspective, where resistance emerges in the space in between cultures, which in themselves are never unitary nor dualistic in the relation self/other or outside/inside. Homi Bhabha has theorized this as a "Third Space", a space that cannot be reduced to any one side of the above dichotomies (Bhabha 1994: 36; cf. Wolf 2000: 135). Despite, or precisely because of, the deep affection that Tagore and Kosovel had for their respective cultures and native regions, they were severe critics of the historical traditions and values that they inherited. Such challenges made them suspect in the eyes of the countrymen who saw in this a betrayal of national consciousness. But Tagore and Kosovel thought *antithetically*, or, one might say, as *universalists,* continuously opposing the dominant oppositions generated within their cultures rather than simply one side of the opposition. Their "national" consciousness was subject to a double

dynamics of going into oneself (and the past) while reaching out to the "other" (and the future) in an ongoing process of self-correction and fulfilment.

Of course they were both merely human, and were not always above idealizations of, or bias towards, the home-grown. Kosovel could certainly romanticize his native region, which he had to leave as a young boy, and Tagore, on occasion, succumbed to Hindu revivalism only to then emerge, perhaps also by way of self-atonement, as its severest critic. Tagore's example is furthermore interesting in that his commitment to India's independence brought him, at one point, into the vanguard of the dominant politics of his time, but no sooner he saw the more violent aspects of the Swadeshi movement (1905-8), he withdrew from active politics, doubly determined that attention needs to be shifted from collective and national rights to individual rights, from political to social problems. His lasting contribution to the critique of nationalism was in recognizing that the boundaries were not only in the horizontal divide between the colonizer and the colonized, but also vertically between the elite and subaltern, not to mention the very many other divisions, particularly religious and caste ones. In Tagore's analysis, nationalism was also an inadequate answer in the world not only unified by modern science and technology, but also whose future depended on recognizing and coordinating the great many ways of being within and across societies.

Thus, in line with some of the most imaginative anti-colonial or anti-imperialist responses, Tagore's and Kosovel's liberational stances commanded, as Said would have it with respect to "resistance at its best", a pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community. An individual must undergo a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness (Fanon) to embrace a more generous pluralistic vision of the world (Ngũgĩ). In other words, what is sought is much more than the simple departure of the colonizers: there must be a complex transformation of the Colonized lest alien hegemony will be replaced merely by a home-grown one.[1]

Were Kosovel and Tagore then nationalists? I find the term sits uncomfortably with the two poets in any narrow or obvious sense, and would question its appropriateness. Nationalism is a complex phenomenon that subsumes a variety of different positions even under a similar set of historic circumstances. Insofar as Tagore

[1] For the above references, cf. the theoretical discussion on pp. 28-32 of the thesis.

and Kosovel were spokesmen for their disenfranchised countries and identified themselves with the cause of national liberation, they will continue to be evoked as "nationalists". But given their privileging of people and "humanity" over the nation made their nationalist positions at best borderline, inflected as they were by pronounced internationalism and universalism. Tagore, as we have seen, rebutting one of the cornerstones of Western liberal modernity, rejected the nation-state altogether as an adequate organizing principle for Indian civilization, and Kosovel drew a distinction between the nation-state and nationhood. Theoretically, both their positions are closest to what Said, Bhabha and others have conceptualised in paradoxical terms as "post-nationalist" or "anti-nationalist nationalists". Certainly Tagore and Kosovel's own critiques of nationalism should not be diminished in this debate, not least because they are as relevant today as they were in their own time.

In fact, anticipating some of the postcolonial critiques of the nation, they questioned the naturalness, or neutralness, of "national" identities and were highly suspicious of the nationalists' motives. If time and again Tagore stressed the existence of an always already connected world that transcends the geographies generated by both colonialism and nationalism, Kosovel reimagined "Slovenianness" along perpetually inclusive and dynamic lines, for "man" in his view was already "cosmopolitan". In that sense, both Tagore and Kosovel continually challenged any politics of identity that divides people socially on the basis of nation, religion, caste, ethnicity, race or other, just as in the intellectual domain they pursued a radical stance of cultural entitlement that likewise transgressed frontiers between "tradition" and "modernity", significantly blurring the lines between home and the world.

It is therefore not surprising to find they also shared a significant social dimension to their lives and work. Tagore was an educator who set up an alternative education system that was largely conceived to fight parochialism and avoid the pitfalls of nationalism, while Kosovel too became a founder of a literary club with a pronounced international orientation whose objective it was to cultivate individuals who could think and feel beyond their local environments. They were both "committed" poets, but not in the sense in which the word is generally understood. Their commitment was not driven by any one particular ideology – they were too rigorously individualist for that. Instead, one could say, they created their own "ideology", the characteristic of which was

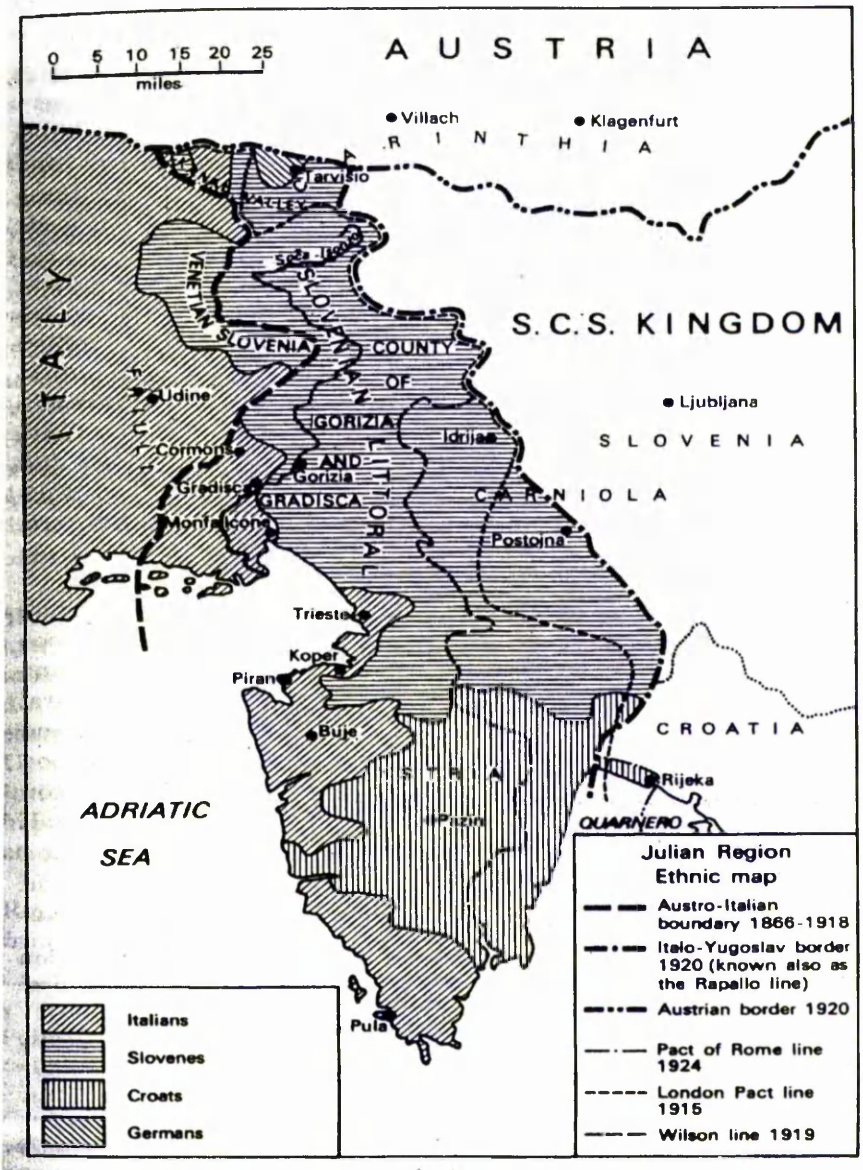
precisely that it lacked any political means to actualize itself and could only become a utopian dream. The "universal" or "new man" of their utopian projections who would institute a future world of peace and solidarity must be understood against their time and specific histories, and yet, we might ask, is "a utopian mentality" entirely out of place even in the context of our contemporary global world? As Leela Gandhi has said: "[...] at this time of world politics, when our solidarities simply cannot be fixed in advance [...] a utopian mentality shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism; always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe" (2007: 31).

Certainly it was the utopian idea(l)s that helped Tagore and Kosovel identify their practical goals and directions, grounding their universalisms in the here-and-now of their local environments. Their universalist voice has also enriched the important and on-going resistance to national chauvinism and imperialism and can by no means be considered irrelevant today. Moreover, I want to suggest, Tagore and Kosovel can help us shift the terms of the theoretical debate on universalism away from the ostensibly false dichotomous view of nationality and universality or nationalism and universalism, by making us see a closer link between individuality and universality. For they were both champions of individuality, but not in the sense of an isolated detached individual domineering over his environment, but an individual locked into a mutually enriching relationship with his or her surroundings, both natural and social. Neither could accept isolationism as a viable stance, not even as a short-term strategy to fight colonial injustice and humiliation. Closing in upon oneself was for each of them but a direct route to cultural and spiritual suicide. The importance of lifeblood coming from a wide network of capillaries lay at the heart of each of their cultural "politics" as well as their own creative work.

They saw no contradiction between universalism and belonging, and as poets they drew heavily on their personal experience allowing themselves the comfort of strong cultural roots while striving to liberate their voices from all that was provincial or limiting. For, indeed, the universal that Tagore and Kosovel upheld was decidedly open-ended, a horizon concept, as it were, rather than anything definitive or purportedly already out there. It was perpetually in the making towards a greater inclusiveness through moments of becoming indifferent to difference (Badiou 2003: 110). They saw

themselves and their countries as part of the developing whole, so the universal they upheld was the "new" universal of Ernesto Laclau's exposition: "the symbol of a missing fullness" (1992: 89) – their Golden Boat. In the final instance, this underlay their creativity as poets, as they continued to grow and experiment with new forms, never stopping, knowing full well there was no end to this discovery. Their own distinct versions of "universality" came about not by writing *back* to the "centre", but rather by writing *through* the various contesting influences that came to bear on their respective situations, and which gave expression to what within their own cultural traditions and beyond were exceptional feats of literary and poetic imagination.

Appendix A – Map of the Border Region



This map is based on the results of the 1910 and 1921 censuses. Communes that had a Slavic majority in both censuses are marked Slavic (Slovenian or Croatian) territory; those that had an Italian majority are included in ethnically Italian territory. In western Istria, communes with a Slavic majority in 1910 and an Italian majority in 1921 are included here in Italian territory. Professor A. E. Moodie drew a similar line on an ethnic map of the Julian Region in his work, *Italo-Yugoslav Boundary*, p. 85. (Joseph Velikonja, professor of geography at the University of Washington, helped me prepare this map.)

Source: Novak, Bogdan, C. (1970) *Trieste, 1941-1954; The Ethnic, Political, and Ideological Struggle*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 5

APPENDIX B – A Selection of Kosovel's Poems

Call for Solitude

That I could come to the midnight landscape
of blue darkness spilling across the field,
that I could escape those streets where
everyone screams, shoves, scrambles and crushes –

That I could come to the midnight landscape
in such solitude for my soul to meet God.
Look, I'm hurt from these ways,
from people's ways my heart hurts.

That I could come to the midnight landscape
where only stars burn and lakes breathe,
where only a shadow spills into eyes,
tree shadows kissing my open eyes,
as I, in my heart, in my sick heart
long for His kiss.

("*Klic po samoti*", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

A Small Coat

I would like to walk around
in a small coat of
words.

But hidden underneath should be
a warm, bright world.

What is wealth?
What is luxury?
For me it is this:
a small coat I have,
and this coat is like
no other.

("*Majhen plašč*", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

Bread

Room 24. In the room five beds, five white beds. In the windows darkness. Outside a lone lamp shines on the deserted street. For whom? Why?

Perhaps a wayfarer will turn and remember: Where, how?

But why tell you this. Five of us in the room. Five students. A young, dark Bosnian– his eyes gazing beyond – reading Tagore. Two Slovenians bent over mechanical drawings on the table, their hair falling across tense, driven faces.

Five lives, and all drawing light from the same lamp bent low over the table, a lamp with a green shade.

Quiet. Only the scratching of pens and the rustle of paper.

It's eleven o'clock. Eleven for me looking at Hodler's "Spring," eleven for the young Bosnian reading Tagore, then looking away as though he were sitting by the white shores of the Ganges. Eleven for him studying, and eleven for the two of them drawing.

One thought, one dissonance: Bread.

"I'm hungry."

All the worlds crushed. Faces crumpled. Straight lines gone crooked and mathematical proofs mere riddles. Tagore hushed, spring stopped.

A new mystery appeared: Bread.

"Bread."

I turned to the desolate street where the light burned like a thought trembling in the winter cold.

Then I saw a man walking down that desolate street. He put out the light, for it was now past eleven. A keeper and an extinguisher of light. He forgot the pilgrim.

("*Kruh*", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

Negative Total

Our life is like a road,
cut off, narrow, without horizon,
desire impaled in the chest,
a negative total.

("*Negativni total*", in Kosovel 2008: 136)

Ecstasy of Death

All is ecstasy, the ecstasy of death!
The golden towers of Western Europe,
white domes—(all is ecstasy!)—
all is drowning in the burning, red sea,
the sun sets and gets drunk in it,
and thousand-times-dead European.
— All is ecstasy, the ecstasy of death.—

The death of Europe will be beautiful, beautiful,
Like a luxuriant queen dressed in gold
she will lie in a coffin of dark centuries,
and die silently, as if she were
closing, ancient, her golden eyes.
— All is ecstasy, the ecstasy of death.—

From the evening cloud (the last
messenger to bring Europe light!),
blood spills into my tired heart,
and, o, there is no more water left in Europe
and we people drink blood,
blood from the sweet evening clouds.
— All is ecstasy, the ecstasy of death.—

Just born, and already you burn in the fire of evening,
all seas are red, all seas
full of blood, all lakes, and no water,
no water for this human to wash his guilt,
to wash his human heart,
no water to quench his thirst
for the quiet, green morning land.

All is evening, and morning won't come
until we all die who carry the guilt of dying,
until we all die
to the last.

Ay, into this landscape, even this green,
dewy landscape, even into this
you will shine, evening sun,
with burning rays? Even into this?

The sea is flooding the green plains,
the sea of stinging evening blood

and there is no salvation, none
until we both fall, you and I,
until we fall, I and all of us,
until we all die under the weight of blood

the sun will shine on us
European corpses,
with golden rays.

("*Ekstaza smrti*", in Kosovel 2008: 53-4)

I saw the Pines Grow

I saw the pines grow
into the sky. Calm stoics
through the flaring sun.
I saw a fire once that would burn them up.

Like old men, the hills
leaned their heads onto their white pillows
and kept silent.
The pines are rustling.
(Who are they talking to?)

I saw how they wandered,
like burning pillars,
into the sky …

My body collapsed into ashes.

("*Videl sem bore rasti*", in Kosovel 2008: 34)

Pines

Pines, pines, in silent horror,
pines in mute horror,
pines, pines, pines!

Dark pines
like sentinesl below the mountain
across the stony paddocks
in a heavy, exhausted murmur.

When a suffering soul bends
on a clear night over the mountain
I can hear stifled voices
and can't sleep again.

'Weary, dreaming pines,
Are my brothers dying,
Is my mother dying
And my father calling me?'

Without answers they are rustling
as if in a weary nightmare,
as if my mother were dying,
as if my father were calling,
as if my brothers were suffering.

("*Bori*", in Kosovel 2008: 30)

Integrals

A rotational evening.
Trees by green water.
Rotation of the spirit.
My spirit is red.
I love my pain
I work from pain.
Even more, even more :
from the bottom of my consciousness.
From the bottom of my consciousness
so that everything is in vain.
Profiteers
dance the can-can.

("*Integrali*", in Kosovel 2008: 77)

Simple Words

I love them, the simple words
of our Karst people,
I love them, love them more
than you, bourgeois poets.

As though I can see the bright land
above the silent green valley,
as though I can see all the rocks
and pines watching over the valley.

I love them, their sharp silence,
like a rough hand
that beckons once more
this lost child...

("*Preproste besede*", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

Autumn Landscape

The sun is autumnally calm
as if it were mourning
behind the slender cypresses
behind the white cemetery wall.
The grass is all red in the sunshine.
Do you wear dogmatic shoes ?
A bicycle alone on the autumn road.
You ride through a dying landscape.
A sober person walks over a field,
as cold as autumn
as sad as autumn.
Belief in humankind.
That is a sacred thought to me.
A speechless silence is like sadness.
I am not sad,
because I don't dwell on myself anymore.

("*Jesenska pokrajina*", in Kosovel 2008: 77)

In Green India

In green India among silent
trees bending over blue water
lives Tagore.
Time there is captured in an azure circle,
the clock does not tell the month or year
but spreads quietly
as if from invisible centres,
over trees and mountains, over the ridges of temples.
There nobody is dying, nobody is bidding farewell;
life is like eternity, caught in a tree.

("*V zeleni Indiji*", in Kosovel 2008: 118)

One Word

I wish I could say one word
just like the spring wind
gently touching your heart.
I wish I could say one word.

But look, I have nothing else,
my heart is an altar cracked in half.
My words are like wounds,
each one of them bleeds.

Dreams don't vault into this night,
only black walls' rough edges
rise like a memory of old times
into the deserted terror of night.

But still there is, there's still
a word—one word at least!
Come, you night-wounded man,
for me to kiss your heart.

("Eno besedo", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

It's Not You

It's not you who will tame the world
and sink in silence, one with time.
Scorched with pain, you will long
with a voice cracked raw.

Like the Karst when the wind still hot
kindles the pines, burns through
dark ground – you step in vain
seeking peace in the dusk.

It's not you who will hold her
when the darkness falls.
You will dream and long,
and death will kidnap your dream.

("*Ti nisi*", tr. Jelnikar & Carlson)

Rhymes

Rhymes
Rhymes have lost their value.
Rhymes aren't convincing.
Did you hear the traction of the wheels ?

The poem should be the traction of pain.
What's the point of phrases, dear orator ?
Store phrases in museums.
Your words need traction
to grab a man by the heart.

Everything has lost its value.
The white sea of the spring night
is washing through the fields and gardens.
A presentiment of the future is passing us by.

("*Rime*", in Kosovel 2008: 67)

Kludsky Circus, Seat 461

Circus.
Gallery.
Seat No. . . .
Colombine
undresses, undresses.
Everybody watches.
Nobody sees
that she is hanging by her teeth.
Rising. Already near the tent-top.
Insolent comments.
Shameful laughter.
Now she sheds her last veil.
They watch her,
biting with their eyes
into her soft body.
They applaud.
She has beautiful thighs.
Wavy breasts.
They applaud
and mock
her suffering
and insult her.
See, the animal
is applauding the human.
The human is animal.
The animal is human.
The valve bursts.
The lions are raging.

("*Cirkus Kludsky, prostor št. 461*", in Kosovel 2008: 86)

Kons : XY

A big elephant is walking through my heart.
Kludsky Circus : Entry 5 Din.
Don't make a song and dance about it.
She is smiling : *cin, cin.*
Peoples' hearts are small and prisons are large,
I would like to walk through people's hearts.
Do you follow this or that clique ?
A thousand dinars or jail for 7 days.
The roses in my heart never weep.
Who could be young and yet depressed ?
What if a cop were coming through the door ?
A military trial, you'd be thrown into jail.
Roses, keep to yourself these difficult days.
Cop, your eyes are like a bayonet,
stupid and evil. (Roses, close your eyes !).
Gandhi's been locked up for a whole six years.

("*Kons: KY*", in Kosovel 2008: 85)

The Arch of Triumph

The Arch of Triumph
Expansions—
Konstructive SPIRIT
KONSTRUCTIVITY
KONS
Three entrances:
from one Him
from the second Her
from the third Me
MYSTICISM

("*Slavolok zmage*", in Kosovel 2008: 142)

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